The Empire Types Back:
Colonialism, Resistance, and Storytelling Online

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Abstract

This doctoral thesis explores the dynamic relationship between digital technologies and storytelling practices in India. In contemporary terms, 'storytelling' encompasses a wide range of creative activities. This work focuses on India's digital storytelling platforms—websites, apps, and archives—that have emerged as venues where ordinary Indian Internet users write fiction, contribute folklore, and record oral tales.

Since 2016, India has experienced a surge in smartphone usage and 4G access, creating numerous opportunities for businesses and investors. This technological revolution has theoretically enabled more people than ever before to speak and write in public forums, and to be heard globally. This thesis examines the outputs of these digital expressions, positioning India as a historical site of storytelling and oral history now entering a new phase of digital creativity, imagination, and cultural preservation. I ask: How have these online spaces shaped Indian storytelling, and why is this relationship significant?

To answer this, I draw on nearly three years of research, blending ethnographic methods and literary analysis in a uniquely interdisciplinary study of Indian storytelling in the digital age. This research includes interviews with 23 digital Indian storytellers and archivists, a literary analysis of over 100 online stories, platform walkthroughs, and visual analysis. My study highlights the significant and joyful role technology plays in shaping leisure time for everyday Indians. It demonstrates how digital archives and storytelling platforms have the potential to shape and define communities in India and empower marginalised groups to contribute to the mainstream literary canon.

The thesis comprises three case studies, each offering different perspectives and focusing on various platforms or storytelling phenomena in India. These case studies show how these digital spaces allow ordinary Indians to express themselves while acknowledging that technology alone is no easy remedy for emancipation, or to correct inequalities. However, the thesis advocates for the creation of more storytelling archives and creative sites, emphasising that building new digital spaces is essential for us to be able to hear fresh new narratives, and for storytellers to be able to type back to the literary canon and the world at large.

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Acknowledgements

When I was a child, I always wanted to write something, and now I have. I could not have foreseen all that these years of writing a thesis would bring; how very hard the worst moments would be, nor how sweet it is to look back at it all now. This is a long-held and cherished dream– but I hope it is at its beginning, and not the end.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Do you remember the first story you were told? Or the first book you read?

I distinctly remember reading the first Harry Potter book on the train from Chennai to Bangalore; the fluorescent lights, the blue vinyl seats, the dark blur of the forests outside, and the total absorption of a new world in my lap. Perhaps you, like me, were a voracious reader who couldn't wait to read alone. Or perhaps you loved hearing stories from other people; from a teacher in a classroom, or by your parents while they tucked you into bed.

Not all of us, as adults, are readers, but all of us are storytellers, or story*listeners.* We share stories to make each other laugh or gasp or cry; we watch stories to escape our lives for an hour or two; we listen to stories to pass the time while cooking or driving or doing laundry. Stories surround us. The urge to tell stories is part of what it means to be human – to not only exist, but to narrate this existence into something that can be shared.

In 2024, we might still read books on trains, hear stories from our parents, and study them in classrooms. But we also watch Netflix, listen to podcasts, play video games, and spend hours on YouTube and TikTok. The creative act of telling and receiving stories is one that has become incontrovertibly mediated by technology. This is not new; as Walter J Ong writes, even writing is a technology that restructured not only the act of storytelling, but all human communication (Ong, 2003). Yet the modern acceleration of digital culture has meant that there are more ways now to hear, read, and tell stories than ever before. While there are numerous criticisms of and concerns about technology as a force which saps creativity and steals attention, it is also undeniably a tool to be manoeuvred which can provide opportunities for creative endeavours.

This thesis asks how the digital has impacted and shaped storytelling in India. By storytelling, I refer to a range of narrative practices which I expand on within the body of this work, including text-based fiction. This introductory chapter sets the scene for a thesis that grapples with postcolonial storytelling in the age of the Internet, and why such work is vitally important.

When I was reading *Harry Potter* on the way to Bangalore as a child, it was 2001, and there was simply nothing else to do on the train but read. Smartphones and mobile Internet were distant dreams, as were the many platforms and tools that have integrated themselves into our daily lives. On a train in India today, one would be hard put to find a single passenger who is not glued to their phone. Once the site of technological service provision, India, the outsourcing capital of the world, a byword for poor connectivity, has undergone a technological revolution. There are now over 900 million Internet users in India, just over 60% of the population: the second-highest number of Internet users in the world (Statista, 2023). Since 2016, India has been able to access fast, cheap, or even free 4G via Jio Technologies. This, coupled with relatively affordable in-country smartphone manufacturing, has led to a tech boom (Safi, 2016).

As India's Internet user base has continued to grow, global companies have turned their eyes to the country. The Indian government and a host of Indian companies, too, have been quick to maximise value from a myriad of opportunities that connectivity allows. Initiatives such as "Make in India", a national push to encourage Indian entrepreneurship, and "Digital India", a campaign to improve Internet infrastructure, have helped Indian businesses and the digital economy. Yet as Payal Arora's 2019 work, *The Next Billion Users* demonstrates, Internet access and smartphones are invaluable for leisure opportunities, too. We need, as Arora asserts, a "new narrative" to capture the online behaviour of the global majority (2019, p. 3). As this thesis demonstrates, there are multiple narratives – infinite stories – to be told, read, and heard about and *from* "the next billion". This thesis weaves together the threads of storytelling and technology, while tying them together within the context of India's rich tapestry of stories old and new.

Stories and Storytelling

The title of this thesis – "The Empire Types Back" – speaks to two crucial elements of storytelling. Readers of postcolonial theory will recognise the allusion to the highly influential work by Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (2002). This seminal text introduces a wide range of postcolonial texts, theories, and cultural issues to readers, stemming from the concept of *writing back* to Britain from its former imperial colonies, in an English that has been transformed, used in a new way

and in a new context (2002, p. 10). This concept of writing – or *typing* – back proves a strong motivation for this thesis, and much of the early motivation for this project derives from the notion that reading and writing can be acts that stimulate, or indeed *simulate*, resistance (Boehmer, 2018, p. 9).

Other readers will, of course, recognise the reference to Episode V of the *Star Wars* film franchise, *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980). This slightly mischievous allusion draws on the cinematic value of this cultural blockbuster: a story that is significant not merely for its cultural context, but also the sheer entertainment it delivers. These two disparate yet interlinked texts speak to how important stories can be across a range of perspectives. Stories are powerful, stories are political, stories are a form of creative resistance, and, perhaps most importantly – stories are *fun*. The acts of writing, reading, and producing stories in all forms are leisure activities which are enjoyed by ordinary people as well as professionals.

Before we proceed, I define the word *storytelling* as it is used throughout this thesis. The ubiquity and flexibility of the term *story* in modern parlance is one that can make it hard to pinpoint. Stories are everything, from "an 'oppositional' practice, a practice of resistance used by the weak against the strong" (Chambers, 1984, p. 50) to "someone telling someone else that something happened" (B. H. Smith, 1980, p. 213). I use the words *story* and *storytelling* deliberately. Storytelling, as Spencer Jordan writes, "could be considered to be a rather archaic term...conjuring up images of night-time ghost stories told orally around flickering flame..." (2019, p. 5). The term is often replaced by words such as *narrative* and *text* in academic or theoretical work. However, as Jordan writes:

> *Storytelling captures something that perhaps is lost with other terms. For a start, the term neatly encapsulates two separate, though intertwined, elements: both the creation of a story and its telling. As a verb, storytelling helps to represent the underlying iterative process between making and telling, between the act of creating a story, and the separate, though interrelated, act of providing access to that story for an audience. In other words, the process by which an audience accesses a story is as important as the story itself.*
>
> *(Jordan, 2019, p. 5)*

Similarly, the word storytelling is used throughout this thesis for its emphasis on both the production of a story and its *telling* – the way a story is shared with audiences, and the impact

this has on story-form, content, and practice. This thesis centres the concept of the storyteller and the work they undertake to write and share their art, interrogating questions of labour and leisure. Furthermore, I use the word *story* to link modern iterations of digital artmaking and narrative with older forms of Indian storytelling. Each Indian region has its own ancient tradition storytelling across a variety of forms, from song, to dance, to oral folklore. India's diverse major religions – Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, and Sikhism – have also produced stories and folklore which have survived millennia, such as the *Mahabharata*, the longest epic poem surviving today. This storytelling culture is at once archaic and yet alive; its roots are many and dispersed, and though many of these narratives are text-based, many, equally, have no textual form at all.

In this thesis, I pay homage to this diversity of form in a digital era, examining how the digital intertwines with written, oral, and visual forms of storytelling. While no single body of work can completely describe the phenomena of digital storytelling in India, I situate the term within clear boundaries. Digital storytelling, in this context, refers to text-based stories (written or oral) which necessitate the use of a computer or other device for production and display (Ryan et al., 2004). I interrogate the usage of storytelling *platforms* that house and produce narratives by ordinary Indian people. The plethora of Internet archives and platforms which create space for Indian amateur storytellers to share stories indicate the important role technology plays in shaping creative and cultural content. In addition, my thesis localises non-Western digital culture, deconstructing the idea of one Indian Internet. To frame Indian digital storytelling under the broad umbrella of "the Global South" does a great disservice to the cultural specificity and local context that defines each individual platform and archive (P. R. Murray & Hand, 2015). Many of the platforms I examine are small and localised to one region of India. This is deliberate; as examined in Chapter 3, I make concerted efforts in this thesis to move away from a large-scale and zoomed-out approach to India. For this reason, too, this project looks at storytelling platforms which are born and made in India. Rather than large global platforms or companies setting up shop in the country – of which there have been many – I investigate Indian grassroots companies, organisations, and archives, which house, curate, and facilitate Indian storytelling.

Roopika Risam unpacks both the promise of postcolonial digital humanities and the failure of many digital archives to deliver on these radical hopes in her work, *New Digital Worlds:*

Postcolonial Digital Humanities in Theory, Praxis, and Pedagogy (2019). As Risam's work explores, the time is ripe for work that closely considers the interweaving of the digital with the literary, the historical, and the cultural in a postcolonial context, and especially to build "new archives, tools, databases, and other digital objects that actively resist reinscriptions of colonialism and neo-colonialism" (2019, p. 4). The Internet is no longer seen as a separate and utopian space with great liberatory potential (Benjamin, 2019; Nakamura, 2002; Noble, 2018). Yet new approaches and new digital futures are nevertheless possible, and indeed unfolding before us. This thesis examines the various ways that everyday Indian storytellers grapple with technology as they *type back* to a long history of postcolonial exclusion.

Research Questions

To focus this work within the vast landscape of stories, digital platforms, and their intersections, I create and address three research questions which are answered through the chapters in this thesis. The overarching question that underpins this project is: *What makes technology-facilitated storytelling in India important?* This question argues from the position of inherent value. I thus frame this thesis as an exploration of the various forms of importance and meaning that digital stories and archives offer to those who create, consume, or produce them. This importance may take various forms and is afforded to platforms both large and small, and stories which deal with the domestic and quotidian as well as those which tackle more political issues. The reader of this thesis will explore multiple forms of importance and value within this work.

I use a case study approach to examine three different contexts of digital storytelling in India. In order to engage with the primary question above, I consider three sub-questions:

1. How do users of Indian digital storytelling platforms use platforms to tell stories and communicate ideas?
2. Why do these Indian users use digital storytelling platforms?
3. What affordances or contexts of these digital storytelling platforms shape storytelling by Indian users?

These three questions consider the stories, platforms, and users of digital storytelling platforms and archives in India. Through an interdisciplinary mix of qualitative methods, from digital

ethnography to literary analysis, I focus my inquiry on the people, processes, and production of digital stories. The research questions indicated above are contextualised within each case study, thus making them topic-informed and relevant.

Contributions and Significance

The great contribution of this project is its multidisciplinary approach to the topical of digital storytelling, and the many links it forges between academic disciplines. Through a blend of literary studies, anthropology, feminist theory, digital humanities, media studies, and sociology, this work uses a novel approach to interrogate both storytelling as a literary practice and the many contexts it arises from.

This thesis also spotlights the work of amateur artists and under-studied digital platforms and archives in India, arguing for a closer consideration of grassroots digital creativity. The platforms that are explored within this text have never been written about before in an academic context; in this sense, this work covers untouched ground. The unique blend of disciplines that have been woven together to build this thesis offer a constructive scaffolding for future scholarship in the digital humanities and beyond. The methods I employ are an unusual combination of literary and sociological, demanding interdisciplinary thinking and insisting that we stop using academic boundaries as a stopping point for creative and academic inquiry. In this rich blend of qualitative social research with literary studies, I pave the way for future research across these fields to similarly fuse methods and to borrow freely from each other. This is thus a methodological plea for research that takes the best of each discipline, creating work that is informed by numerous forms of knowledge creation.

The content of this thesis delves deeply and closely into lesser-studied platforms and archives across India. Using a case study approach, this thesis is able to cover both a breadth of knowledge while also digging deeply into the richness of each individual platform or phenomena. This thesis also traces and links digital storytelling with its analogue antecedents, specifically in Chapter 6, thus allowing for a study of storytelling that is not only contemporary but historical in its focus. While much writing on Indian literature stems from analyses of prominent Indian writers, this thesis is instead concerned with the amateur, seeing digital technologies as tools which can amplify the amateur's voice and forge new spaces for creative

work. I engage with debates and considerations of labour, creativity, amateurism in art and the digital's role in these debates.

This work is also important in its examination of digital behaviours in an India post-2016; an India with newfound smartphone and 4G access. For many years, considerations of the digital in India have been limited by the low penetration rate of devices and Internet access in the country. It has been difficult to consider the technological behaviours of Indian people, and the entanglement of the digital with other aspects of life, without the caveat that such digital behaviour is limited to India's elites. This is no longer the case. While there are certainly great inequalities in India's Internet access – such as, for example, the nation's high rate of Internet shutdowns (Ellis-Petersen & Hassan, 2023) – more people than ever before have, use, and thoroughly enjoy the Internet. Payal Arora's work began this crucial discussion of the actual online behaviours of the global poor (Arora, 2019). In this thesis, I continue this exploration by examining how India's ever-expanding digital population reads, writes, and engages joyfully with the digital world.

Finally, this thesis is significant because of the moment I write in and from. As I type these words, India has just re-anointed the BJP and Narendra Modi in another election. The incontrovertible harm that the BJP has done to countless Indians, specifically those from marginalised backgrounds, has been well-documented (Ashutosh Varshney & Staggs, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2020, 2023; Ramachandran, 2020; Waikar, 2018). Slowly, too, writers and researchers have begun to capture the damage that the Hindutva project has wrought upon Indian stories. Hindu nationalism is finding its way to large-scale narrative productions, specifically via Bollywood and Indian television shows (Subramanian, 2022). Stories on screen are becoming more jingoistic, Hindu-centric, and focused on the preservation of a great, glorious, and mythical past. Such a sea-change is slow to emerge in the world of print, but it will, nevertheless, occur, though its spoor is not yet to be found across this project. There is a great interest in the political right-wing narratives of this era of Indian society. However, in this thesis, I argue for a closer consideration of those stories which are not deliberately political, but which nevertheless represent the daily consumption of many Indian readers. Domestic fiction, women's fiction, and community tales are all too easy to deem 'unimportant', both contemporarily and historically. Yet in the following chapters, I find examples of such quotidian digital storytelling as play, as cultural preservation, as community-building, and as

escapism. These uses are deeply important, even fundamental to an Indian society that is intent on reshaping its cultural history and present. In an India so obsessed with its narrative past, I ask: what of India's narrative digital future(s)?

Chapter Overview

The first two chapters following this one set the scene for the rest of the thesis. In Chapter 2, I present the Literature Review, which brings together three key themes that define this project. I weave together *storytelling* (particularly digital stories and archive-building), *voice and agency*, and the *cultural context of India* to create the backdrop against which this work takes place. The literature used in this chapter is broad-ranging and highly relevant to the multidisciplinary scope of this thesis. It ranges geographically from Silicon Valley's tech czars to amateur creatives in India, and temporally from the British colonisation of India to the present day.

Chapter 3 is entitled "Ways of Seeing: Closeness in/as Methodology". This section serves as both an in-depth description and discussion of my research design and approach to this vast topic, while also laying bare some of the challenges I experienced in undertaking this work during the COVID pandemic. I consider the interdisciplinary lenses that shape this project and argue for looking closely as a method, and for seeing in multiple different ways. This treatise *for closeness* heavily influences my own methodology in this thesis and contributes to an intimate examination of the platforms and users I engage with.

Chapters 4-6 are case studies, or perhaps short stories in the parlance of a story-focused thesis. As such, they are interconnected and thematically related, but each chapter speaks to a different platform or phenomena. Chapter 4, "Beyond the Page", dives straight into India's biggest commercial digital storytelling platforms: Pratilipi, a Bangalore-based storytelling app with over 20 million monthly users, and Juggernaut, a Delhi publishing house and former app itself. In this chapter, I interview readers, writers, and platform executives across the digital storytelling landscape to understand what draws them to these platforms specifically and technology-facilitated storytelling more broadly. Through an exploration of India's largest storytelling and e-publishing sites, I investigate how the digital is disrupting contemporary forms of writing and reading, as well as shaping the way ordinary Indian citizens engage in labour and leisure.

Chapter 5 moves the scene far away from India's urban centres into the small village of Munsiyari in Uttar Pradesh. This rural northern locale is the home of "Voices of Rural India", the digital archive that is the focus of this chapter. Voices of Rural India – or VRI – is a project which invites rural storytellers across India to contribute folklore, community tales, and oral histories to one digital archive. Developed during the COVID-19 pandemic, VRI represents an effort to preserve cultural memories while also promoting tourists' awareness of the rural locations spotlighted on the website. In this chapter, I look closely at the stories that comprise this archive, questioning and considering the various meanings and complexities of *community storytelling* as labour and theme. Using a platform walkthrough and literary analysis of the stories on VRI, I explore the richness of this digital archive while also interrogating the postcolonial digital archive as a space of promise and change (Risam, 2019).

The final empirical chapter of this thesis refocuses storytelling as both an ancient and contemporary phenomenon. Specifically, Chapter 6 looks at orality in Indian culture; its power, its scope for agency, and the way that technology-mediated orality is returning today via digital tools such as voice notes, archives, and audio stories. Tracing India's oral story culture from the 3rd century BCE to present day, I highlight specific examples of voice across time to ask what the significance is of storytelling at all. I look at examples from the oral transmission of the Vedas to digital archives of the Partition of India, questioning who has the power to speak, and in what contexts. This chapter wrestles with questions of agency and power in storytelling, using Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) as a starting point. I end this chapter by turning towards the future of digital orality, and the re-emergence of this ancient mode in contemporary times.

In the conclusion to this thesis, I summarise the key themes and findings of this research, indicating directions where this work should be taken in the future. I argue for the creation of more digital spaces where amateur Indian creatives can build community, share stories, and be heard.

In writing this thesis, I collect tales from around India. In doing so, I have become something of a storyteller myself, fashioning a book out of the many disparate words and ideas that I have found and that have been shared with me. I begin this story here, inviting the reader to follow me on a journey across contexts, across times, and across India.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

Introduction

This interdisciplinary literature review is split into three major sections: 'Telling Tales', 'Hearing Tales', and 'Histories, Presents and Futures: A Story of India'. As can be surmised from the titles, the first two sections in this chapter discuss the creation of digital stories and questions around voice, power, technology, and labour. In each sub-section, I explicitly link my own thesis work to the topic at hand, signalling to the reader the importance of each thread of this literature review. The final section considers the important historical and future context of this work in India. I detail India's historical and present relationship with technology and its ongoing relationship with right-wing extremism, as well as arguing for the importance of writing this thesis during this current moment in India's history. In weaving these threads together, I combine texts and theorists that are too rarely in dialogue with each other, from both the humanities and social science disciplines, to knit together a brand-new story.

Telling Tales

Storytellers-in-Chief

> *"The most powerful person in the world is the storyteller. The storyteller sets the vision, values, and agenda of an entire generation that is to come...*
>
> *Steve Jobs, 1994*

Despite – or perhaps because of – the ubiquity of the term storytelling, one could be forgiven for not fully understanding what it is that *storytelling* refers to. This is specifically true of storytelling and the digital. Our understanding of what stories are, and what storytelling means, have been altered and reconstituted by the enthusiastic coinage of this term by technology firms (Paskin, 2022). As Steve Jobs' quote indicates, Apple and its fellow "big tech" peers have long been fascinated by the notion of technology as storytelling. Such companies

have used the theme of storytelling to imply the creativity and innovation in their practice for decades (O'Mara, 2019). Companies like Google, Microsoft and Apple have run advertisements describing their practice as 'storytelling', refer to their CEOs as 'storyteller-in-chief' (Gallo, 2022), and assert that "we're all storytellers"(Google, 2014). In this way, innovative tech companies rebranded the traditional work of software engineering and technology production into a form of labour that could be seen as creative and glamorous. The description of forms of tech work as *storytelling* builds a mythos around this industry (Gill, 2002), while also making it seem inviting and familiar. It frames tech work as "a form of "artistic creativity" [that] has allowed the firm's workers to reimagine themselves collectively as autonomous creators and restore to their labor, if only for a while, the sense of social value that is so often falsely claimed for it by corporate marketer" (Turner, 2009, p. 88) 'Storyteller' is a term that combines whimsy and power, age-old practices with innovative new ideas.

This thesis is not focused on storytelling in the context of big tech's marketing campaigns, but I include it here to indicate the ways in which storytelling – a word that in itself could be described as somewhat fantastical– has been adopted by technology companies as a buzzword. There are many uses and *mis*uses of the term *storytelling* to describe tech work or the targeted advertising business model of big tech firms. Even during the course of this doctoral project, I have noticed the explosion of "storytelling culture", or rather the widespread use of this term. Beyond big tech, "storytelling" has emerged via TED talks (C. Anderson, 2019), advertising and marketing, and various other businesses industries that have sought to harness the power of the "personal story" (Pulizzi, 2012; Woodside et al., 2008). Though it is a term that is oversaturated in business culture, I will be reclaiming it for this thesis. Spencer Jordan explains his rationale for the term in his own work:

> *Storytelling of course could be considered to be a rather archaic term in itself, conjuring up images of night-time ghost stories told orally around flickering flame and dancing shadows…Yet storytelling captures something that perhaps is lost with other terms. For a start, the term neatly encapsulates two separate, though intertwined, elements: both the creation of a story and its telling. As a verb, storytelling helps to represent the underlying iterative process between making and tell, between the act of creating a story, and the separate, though interrelated, act of providing access to that story for an audience.*
>
> *(2019, p. 5)*

Jordan outlines several ideas here that I use throughout this literature review and my thesis. He speaks of the creation and the telling of a story as being joined in the term "story-telling", thus outlining the importance of the audience in shaping a story. He writes, too, of the "iterative process" of making and telling, suggesting the dynamic and mutable form of electronic or digital storytelling, which can be responsive and changed. Jordan also indicates oral storytelling culture as a basis for thinking about the use of the term. Oral cultures of storytelling and their relationships with technology are the focus of Chapter 6 of this thesis. In all these different iterations of what storytelling is, Jordan gestures to the types of labour that form the storyteller's practice: the making, creating, and dissemination of stories.

Finally, as the adoption of the word by tech companies like Google and Apple indicates, there is a deep desire to build a narrative around technology. In an era of digital storytelling, stories are shaped by technology in their creation and dissemination. For its part, technology too has long been shaped by stories. The link between imagination and technological futures far predates the Internet, and stretches back into earlier conceptions of the possibilities and horrors that science could unleash (Cave et al., 2020) . All stories we read now are shaped in some way by their relationship with digital media, whether it is because they are bought on Amazon (McGurl, 2021) or processed on computers (Ryan et al., 2004).

In this project, I choose not to focus on Western big tech firms and the affordances they lend to digital storytelling, because research in this field has thus far been largely focused on these very companies (Marchant, 2018; Papacharissi & de Fatima Oliveira, 2012; M. M. Wood & Baughman, 2012). It is easy to limit the Internet to major companies such as Facebook, Google, and Apple, but in choosing *not* to do so I reject the self-appointed "storytellers-in-chief" that companies such as these appoint. Rather, I turn to grassroots storytellers who are shaping digital culture and creative practices – a new generation of amateur "chief storytellers". As Payal Arora argues, it is imperative that collective imaginaries and concepts of technology outside the West also imagine people using technology for creative purposes, for leisure, and sometimes for purely trivial reasons (2019, p. 3). Only by affording Indian users of the Internet the same rich detail that research has historically afforded Western users can we hope for a more inclusive picture of who uses technology, and how.

The "Digital" in Storytelling

Digital storytelling at its core refers to stories which *necessitate* the use of a computer for production and display (Ryan et al., 2004). Since the dawn of the Internet, literary critics and theorists alike have made predictions about the so-called "death of the book" (S. Murray, 2015, p. 316) and have argued that digital technology might render the print form obsolete. Scholarship that implies technology will kill the book today seem "passé, almost embarrassingly naïve" (S. Murray, 2018, p. 1). As Simone Murray's work demonstrates, we must consider the digital's significance for literary culture without automatically seeing the rise of the digital as a portent for the end of reading. Rather, as this thesis argues, reading habits have expanded to complement and include the digital. Technology also has a significant role in digitising not only fiction but also cultural histories, folklores and traditions (Burgess & Klaebe, 2009). Digital storytelling has not made 'real' literature less relevant, but rather the digital influences traditional print in its "[attentiveness] to the varied and sometimes contradictory permutations of contemporary culture". There is a real need for literary studies which is both "contemporary and contextual" (S. Murray, 2015, p. 319). It is this gap which my own work speaks to, in a consideration of technology as both method and theme of the stories on the Indian platforms I examine.

The discipline of *digital literary studies,* a relatively recent coinage, is one which typically refers to the use of computational methods, such as natural language processing, to the corpus of literary texts (Hoover et al., 2014). The merging of the computational with the literary offers multiple new ways to consider reading and text and to locate a new multi-formed site of literary practice (Bode, 2022). Valuable as this field is, my own thesis seeks to frame the digital as cultural and thematic rather than methodological. That said, the digital humanities do offer a productive frame for this work. Specifically, the work of Roopika Risam (2019) in arguing for the decolonisation of the digital humanities has been a central consideration throughout my own research. The opportunity to not only lay to rest the colonial interventions of the historic archive, but also to "tell new stories, shed light on counter histories, and create spaces for communities to produce and share their own knowledge, should they wish" (Risam, 2019, p. 5) indicates how crucial this moment is in producing digital humanities research in a postcolonial context. Alongside fictional tales and what we may consider more traditional examples of *story,* I also engage with digital archives of folklore and memory. As Parthasarathi

Bhaumik argues, the tradition of Indian literature is not "one-dimensional and homogenous; it cannot be circumscribed within a singular genre" (2022, pp. 71–72). Thus, the consideration of Indian stories must dissolve the "generic boundaries" of literary traditions and consider the practice of storytelling as something which blends, transacts, and shares forms (Bhaumik, 2022). The postcolonial digital archive offers the promise of decolonised digital records (Risam, 2019), as well as a new home for intangible cultural memories which are poorly accommodated in India's restrictive and limited physical archives. The role that digital archives in India will and do play in preserving culture which is often marginalised, such as stories from Dalit communities, is significant (Dattaray, 2022). This thesis engages with some of these uses of the digital archive, such as in Chapters 5 and 6, where I examine the use of an oral story archive in Kerala. Alongside these optimistic visions of a future digital utopia, however, Ward and Wisnicki remind us of the digital archive's "haunting by the imperial archive, an acceptance of the impossibility of ever being free of that ghost" (2019, p. 203). Their work asks a pertinent and tantalising question: "Might these newly formed archives preserve the past differently in order to imagine new futures?" (2019, p. 200) In asking this, the writers gesture to the ultimate aim of using the digital archive to conceive of new, just, decolonial futures, rather than to simply rewrite the past. In this thesis, I fittingly look towards the futurity of digital storytelling by considering its varied and multimodal present. I particularly consider the digital archive as a space of community-making and collective memory in Chapters 5 and 6.

The edited volume *Literary Cultures and Digital Humanities in India* (2022) offers a rich range of texts on cultures of creative making, archiving, and writing in South Asia. Specifically, the work draws attention to two fundamental qualities that also define this thesis. Firstly, the book focuses on the creative projects of amateur collectives and communities, thus showcasing the broad range of innovative literary talent in India that is not typically represented by media coverage of Indian writers (Maniar, 2022). Secondly, the wide array of cultures and creations in the text indicate that literary cultures are wide-ranging and disparate, with little commonality except for the use of technology (Zaidi & Pue, 2022). This thesis, too, explores a range of contexts seeking to highlight the multitudinous stories and creative acts that make up *digital storytelling.*

Alongside the intertwining of digital literary production and the archiving of these products, there has been also been a growth in considering the importance of narrative in daily and digital life amongst non-literary academics, who identify the presence of story structures in everything from news reporting to entrepreneurial pitches (Polletta, 2006; Polletta & Callahan, 2017). Furthermore, as Francesca Polletta argues, storytelling is a means of self-definition and of claiming agency over one's own life and circumstances, especially when outside forces (politics, war, societal oppression) deny this (Polletta, 2006). Digital storytelling is furthermore an expression of personal voice which can have interesting and exciting implications for the future of participatory development and the co-creation of histories and futures (Burgess & Klaebe, 2009; Tacchi, 2009). It is thus critically important to consider voice, agency, and what types of digital stories we have access to.

Readers and Writers

While digital storytelling takes myriad forms, I focus on digital storytelling in the form of primarily text-based stories. In doing so, I link present digital storytelling not only with print-based literature, but also with its close ancestors in hypertext fiction.

Originating even before the development of the World Wide Web (Nelson, 1993), hypertext fiction now tends to refer to any fiction that utilises hypertext HTML links, although examples abound of pre-Internet "hypertext" novels[1]. Hypertext fiction is characterised by its nonlinearity, its interactive relationship with the reader, and its ever-changeability (Nelson, 1993). Hypertext pioneer Michael Joyce describes the "frantic" nature of electronic text, in that it is always replacing itself, "always printing" (1992, p. 87). In hypertext fiction, the reader's choices determine the reading pathway, and multiple readers can construct or inscribe different meanings – indeed, different texts – upon the story they read. While hypertext fiction is not the specific textual focus of this project, it nevertheless influences it in many ways. Specifically, the culture of hypertext fiction, and the type of reader it aims to produce – one constantly mapping, moving, and travelling – is of particularly interest. Hypertext fiction seeks to centre the reader as the creator of content, who transcends the "linear, bounded, and fixed" qualities of traditional text (Delany & Landow, 1991, p. 4). For this project, it is this type of

[1] See, for example, James Joyce's Ulysses (1922), Vladimir Nabokov's Pale Fire (1962) or Italo Calvino's The Castle of Crossed Destinies (1973) for nonlinear texts that are often described as "hypertext".

reader/writer interaction which shapes my own consideration of reading on the Internet. The experience of being on the Internet – especially on new or unfamiliar websites – is one that can be what Barthes refers to as a *readerly* or *writerly* experience. Readerly content is fixed, linear, its meaning pre-determined. Writerly content enables the reader to take a role in constructing and determining meaning. Barthes argues that the "ideal" text blurs distinctions between the reader and writer:

> *. . . the networks are many and interact, without any one of them being able to surpass the rest; this text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one; the codes it mobilizes extend as far as the eye can reach, they are indeterminable . . . ; the systems of meaning can take over this absolutely plural text, but their number is never closed, based as it is on the infinity of language (1974, p. 35)*

Barthes' essay refers, of course, to pre-electronic forms of fiction. Yet he argues for a form of writing that incorporates and challenges the reader, much as hypertext fiction seeks to. Barthes further argues that while the readerly text is enjoyable to read, it is the writerly text that is "blissful". The reader of the writerly text must work to co-author the text to determine its meanings (Barthes, 1973, p. 15); readers thus become writers. As I argue later in this thesis, digital storytelling platforms work as "writerly" texts, where the reader takes an active role in exploring, mapping, and reading the text. It is this engagement between readers, writers and the Internet that unites them which I explore in my research.

Rise of the Amateur

An integral part of this thesis is in its championing and focus on amateur storytellers. The figure of the amateur can be said to bind together several strands of this project, in the amateur's relationship with technology (Campt, 2020), creative labour and the relationship with their counterpart, the professional (Bryan-Wilson & Piekut, 2020). The word amateurism can be a denigrating term or a rationale behind the devaluation of certain forms of art. Yet art and creator cultures now are indelibly shaped, even dominated, by the amateur (Barzun, 1956). We are surrounded by amateur content creators, and amateur aesthetics, of all forms (Paasonen, 2010). Platforms such as OnlyFans, YouTube and Instagram spotlight and encourage amateurs to share their labours with a viewing public. For this thesis, I focus

specifically on amateur storytellers and writers, with the aim of highlighting this important feature of modern popular culture.

The most relevant and comparable form of amateur writing is that of the fanfiction writer. In recent years, discourse about fanfiction has travelled such that it is no longer seen as "a wacky thing that only strange people do" (Coppa, 2017, p. 1). Francesca Coppa's comprehensive work on the subject defines fanfiction as "networked creative work produced within and for a community of fans", noting that fan-produced work is created for community-determined norms and desires. 'Fics' are also given as gifts. Rather than monetary value being ascribed to fics to determine their worth, fanfiction is typically celebrated via comments, shares, and the reciprocal creation of art (Turk, 2014). Fanfiction thus offers a fascinating example of creativity that takes place outside and indeed in *rejection* of the marketplace, instead creating a new social structure around the creation and receipt of stories (Coppa, 2017).

However, the production of fanfiction is a form of labour, and the alternative gift economy on fanfiction platforms such as Archive of Our Own gesture to a desire to repay this work in some form. In many workstreams, amateurs are typically uncompensated (or at least paid poorly) for their labour. Resisting attempts to gush over the amateur, Bryan-Wilson and Piekut note that the valorising of amateurs cements their status as a class destined to remain unpaid; "Why pay professionals? Amateurism is cheaper." (2020, p. 21) For some, the authors write, amateurism is a temporal condition, altered upon the transition to "professional". For others seen as being separate from "narratives of progress" (such as indigenous people), amateurism is a more permanent status. To this argument, I observe that many fanfiction writers do not seek to become professional writers, and that fanfiction is instead knowingly and joyfully *not* mainstream (Fathallah, 2017). In this sense, Bryan-Wilson and Piekut's discussion on amateurism does a disservice to alternative spaces of creativity and production where becoming a professional is not the goal. Fanfiction provides a valuable parallel to the digital storytelling platforms in this work because it, too, is a form of digital creative practice centred on community interests. Fanfiction plays a significant role as a form of online storytelling which is adjacent to mainstream literary production, thus influencing the latter while also producing its own distinctive spaces and readers. This parallel amateur literary world and the culture it begets is highly relevant to the digital platforms I explore in this thesis.

Alongside considerations of labour, this thesis also explores the role of women and feminised work in the digital literary sphere. Kylie Jarrett uses the term 'women's work' to consider "the social, reproductive work typically differentiated from productive economies of the industrial workplace" (2013a, p. 18). In digital media, such work can involve processes such as sharing and liking content, moderating forums or setting user practices within online communities (Jarrett, 2013b). Jarrett's definition of women's work is different to the role of *feminised* labour, specifically within the realm of literature and publishing, as Sarah Brouillete discusses in her work. Brouillette examines the early feminisation of publishing and editorial departments as an example of an industry with "an acceptable aura of decorous gentility" (2022). The publishing work force, historically comprised mostly of women (Coser et al., 1985), did offer new opportunities for these educated women to partake in professional work, but these opportunities were concentrated in entry-level roles and in less respected publishing niches, like mass-market romance (Brouillette, 2022). The *feminisation* of publishing is evident in this thesis; most of the platform employees I spoke to were women, and the men I spoke to largely worked in product development, software design, or other fields coded as being "men's work" (Hicks, 2018). These gendered divides are also evident in readership and authorship. Katherine Bode's work on Australian readers indicates that as novel writing has become less "culturally valuable" in the 1990s and 2000s, due to a rise in self-publishing, there is an analogous rise in women's writing. This suggests that women's inclusion, even dominance, in authoring books is not due to greater social opportunities, but rather the declining social value of literature (Bode, 2009) – and especially of certain types of literature. The romance genre is typically seen as a cultural form with low social value, though there are contemporary proclamations of reclaiming romance and "bad" fiction, as well as considerations of how the romance genre serves as escapism for women in particular (Radway, 1991). In this thesis, particularly in Chapter 4, I explore some of the ways that reading and writing romantic fiction provides ordinary readers with the opportunity to explore fantasies. Fan-made fiction or amateur writing on platforms is particularly associated with the genre, and is typically written and read by young women (Brouillette, 2022).

There are all kinds of amateurs in this thesis, from the writers on Pratilipi in Chapter 4 with burgeoning fandoms to storytellers on digital archives in Chapter 5 telling their tales to an audience for the very first time. These disparate groups do not experience creativity in the same way, nor are their lives necessarily comparable, suggesting the way that even amateurism

is a sliding scale that valorises some creatives while making it difficult for others to find communities. Amateurism influences this thesis because the amateur is both the future, and indeed, the *present* of creative production and storytelling. Abigail De Kosnik speculates that the future of creativity might be dependent on amateur cultural archivists who pirate digital content, and that "amateur archivists donate their free labour to preserve amateur productions" (2020, p. 65). Piracy, too, represents an amateur form of dissemination that is free and viable only through technology. Whatever the future of the amateur, their presence is significant and keenly felt in all areas of creative (and other) industries, as I have demonstrated. In this thesis, I focus on amateur digital storytelling from India, recognising the simultaneous importance and ubiquity of the amateur in modern culture. I consider the amateur both in the framework of the literary canon and as an actor in the creative labour market.

Platforms are a crucial node in this thesis and in the lives of creative users; it is no longer possible to consider the Internet without the lens of the platforms which collectively comprise it. The fact that the word "platform" covers all manner of websites, spaces, forums, apps, and select corners of the Internet is deliberate; Tarleton Gillespie's work explores the way the term platform "could suggest a lot while saying very little" (2010, p. 351). Gillespie's work is fundamental in considering the minimalist role that platforms take in working with creators, freeing themselves from expectations that would otherwise be incumbent on an employer. Platforms also play a role in setting expectations on whether to pay amateurs, and how much; Caplan and Gillespie, for example, write on the demonetisation of YouTube creators and how they can be excluded from ad revenue sharing: "A demonetized video remains on the platform and can still be seen; only the ad revenue is halted." That is, the amateur will not be paid for their work, but is nevertheless expected to produce content which generates "massive financial value for the platforms distributing it" (2020, p. 3). Caplan and Gillespie argue that platforms are able to exploit amateur creators in this way because creators may have little idea as to the impact of their content and the size of their fan base. They may "not perceive it as work" or see themselves as having little bargaining power. Indeed, even framings of creative labour as "labours of love" can contribute to the continued subjugation of amateur creators (Jaffe, 2021). Amateurs are typically reliant on technology to create, distribute and advertise their own work (Shirky, 2008); technology acts as both the driver of "grassroots creativity", and, via the monopoly of large platforms, its gatekeeper. Platforms and their affordances are thus a crucial aspect of study in this thesis; platform logics can "make or break" creators (Burgess, 2021a),

and are significant in defining and conveying definitions of "value" to audiences. My own work focuses not only on creative storytelling, but the *platformisation* (Duffy et al., 2019) of this process. Duffy et al. define platform practices as "strategies, routines, experiences, and expressions of creativity, labour, and citizenship that shape cultural production through platforms" (2019, p. 2). Through this definition, platformisation encompasses nearly all the ways in which creators can produce art and interact with communities, speaking to the enormous impact of platform power (Culpepper & Thelen, 2020) in shaping cultural norms.

The outsize impact of platforms, particularly the global behemoths which Culpepper & Thelen describe, can lead to a relative inequality between these companies and amateur creators, who are undervalued, underpaid and without protections. What, then, of those who love amateur work? I refer here to fans, readers, and viewers who play an important role in the dissemination and popularity of the creative art they love. In a contemporary era, fan culture is busier and more immersive than ever (Duffett, 2013). Fan culture plays a key role in moulding popular culture and in generating popularity for authors and other types of artists, as comprehensively explored by Judith Fathallah in her work on fanfiction (Fathallah, 2017). Baym and Burnett write of fan labour within the Swedish independent music scene, observing that fans create a presence and "hype" for artists far beyond what a professional label can hope to do on its own (Baym & Burnett, 2009). Banks & Humphreys position themselves as being sceptical of the term "labour exploitation" to describe amateur creator and fan dynamics (2008, p. 402). Such an argument risks being unreceptive to the invisible and fundamental strands of "free labour" which animate the Internet and makes it a space of value (Terranova, 2000). Fan culture does entail devotion, but not *only* devotion; rather, fans work to create spaces they want to occupy, to "make those things be what they want them to be" (De Kosnik, 2012, p. 102). The relationship between reader and writer in shaping digital storytelling can be considered as a form of co-authorship that elevates the reader into a writer of text. It is thus helpful to think of this relationship as a form of co-creative labour which raises important and exciting ideas about the potential of these networks for amateurs of all categories (Banks & Humphreys, 2008). We do not pay readers for their role in shaping stories online, but what other creative and innovative ways can the reader/writer relationship be recognised, encouraged, and shaped?

Hearing Tales

> *"There's really no such thing as the 'voiceless'. There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard."*
>
> *Arundhati Roy, 2004*

Who Speaks for Whom?

This work draws key inspiration from Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak's seminal essay, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', while also making several key departures from the text (Landry et al., 1996). For many years, critics have lambasted the essay for everything from its opaque prose (Eagleton, 2005) to its conclusion that the subaltern cannot speak. It has become commonplace to see articles titled, for example, 'Can the Subaltern Tweet?' (Trillò, 2018). This is a misreading of Spivak's point, and furthermore overstates the liberating qualities of social media and the Internet. We must not conflate growing Internet access with a shift in the power structures that dominate Internet geographies (Graham, 2014). Though the Internet has created opportunities to speak and to hear, the specific benefits and freedom of these platforms will be examined in further detail in this project.

This project specifically considers Indian storytellers, and though marginalisation and the role of identity is a significant consideration, I do not specifically focus on Spivak's "subaltern", because Spivak herself cautions against using the term too loosely:

> *The subaltern is not just a classy word for "oppressed", for [the] Other, for somebody who's not getting a piece of the pie … . In post-colonial terms, everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern—a space of difference.*
>
> *(de Kock, 1992)*

It is more fruitful and indeed more interesting for the contemporary researcher to consider the question "can the subaltern speak?" as a *series* of questions (Mani, 1998). Why can't the subaltern speak? How do the marginalised speak, or try to? What conditions prevent them from speaking? This latter point is crucial to this thesis. In an interview with Leon de Kock, Spivak argued: "you don't give the subaltern voice. You work for the bloody subaltern, you work against subalternity." (de Kock, 1992). Though this work is not focused specifically on

the traditional subaltern as theorised by Gramsci and later, Spivak, I explore the contexts, cultures and means by which ordinary Indian Internet users and storytellers attempt to speak and be heard.

Spivak's work is touched on in Alcoff's 1991 essay, "The Problem of Speaking for Others", which aptly explains the many contradictions in trying to represent others, or in asking them to represent themselves (Alcoff, 1991). These two modes are represented in Spivak's essay via Marx's philosophies of *vertreten* (to represent someone) and *darstellen* (to embody; in this essay, to represent oneself). Spivak argues that we cannot assume that the oppressed can freely represent themselves (Spivak, 1999); yet the alternative, speaking for others, is as Alcoff expresses, a deeply contentious issue. How can we assume the ability to transcend our location, and understand the lives and words of others? Yet if we do not speak for others, are we abandoning a certain responsibility – particularly as feminists? (Alcoff, 1991). The essay gestures towards the self-centeredness of the researcher: what should *I* do? Must *I* remain silent? Alcoff observes that speaking for others is often born of a desire for mastery and, I would argue, a sense that 'I' know better. Western researchers (and non-Western researchers in the Western academy, like myself) often see this problem in terms of speaking, rather than hearing; they (or we) do not do enough to try and understand, and actively hear, the perspectives and life experiences of the so-called 'Other'. These considerations are highly relevant for the researcher seeking to represent her subjects and tell the story of this thesis. hooks expresses this best; she notes that white researchers "met me in the center. They greeted me as colonizers" (1989, p. 152). This suggests that the Western academy does not do enough to venture out to the margins, to listen to these experiences, and to 'journey to' the space of the Other. Rather, we expect these experiences to be translated and spoken to us in a way we will understand (hooks, 1989; Sharp, 2008). Elizabeth Spelman questions: "Are we really willing and able to hear anything and everything that they might have to say, or only what we don't find too disturbing? Are we prepared to hear what they say, even if it involves learning whole concepts or whole languages that we don't yet understand?" (1988, p. 163) Spelman's point support hooks' experience of Western researchers, and further suggests how readers and researchers may promote voice which is 'easy' to translate, and to hear. The Western way of knowing becomes equated with the only way to know, and to be (Sharp, 2008). The question 'who is heard?' creates conditions which make it very difficult for people of colour, particularly those from the Global South, to thrive.

Zhang et al. argue that Western writers and neoliberal spaces promote "voicings" rather than true "voice". "Voicings" in this context refers to "the shifting nature of voice as acts of speaking occur within various contexts" (2012, pp. 204–205); that is, the specific moments when non-Western speakers are permitted to speak. The authors raise and examine the idea that non-Western writers and speakers are only asked to speak in certain contexts or about certain topics, and learn to speak in such a way that they will be heard; "ventriloquised" (Weidman, 2006) . Gajjala and Birzescu further observe that voice is often only afforded to South Asians in neoliberal contexts, such as by nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) or charities spotlighting their work in the region (Gajjala & Birzescu, 2010).

In the context of India, fascist and colonialist logics ensure that the "voices" heard in public spaces are typically those belonging to upper-caste male Hindus from urban centre. The rise of the right-wing in India has helped to censor many critical narratives from mainstream media and art. In particular, Dalit voices are often notably absent from spaces of power and online representation (Heering, 2013; R. Jeffrey, 2001) Dalit women are particularly marginalised in Indian society (Rege, 2013; S.J et al., 2014), experiencing high levels of violence and discrimination. Islamophobia, too, is rampant in India, aided and abetted by the Indian government and its supporters (Brass, 2006; Waikar, 2018). This thesis engages with these aspects of identity but does not explicitly set out to filter storytellers through the prism of caste or religion, not least due to my own privileged positionality in this case and the sensitivity of this information and work. However, identity, geography and caste do emerge in my readings in nuanced ways, particularly in Chapters 5 and 6.

Western formats and cultural conventions of speaking are dominant in digitally mediated spaces, thus making it hard for 'unconventional' forms of speech – especially if these are in another language – to be considered valid and important. Translation is a crucial point here. Much of the Internet is in English, and this example of language inequality is yet another way in which non-Western Internet users and writers are expected to conform to Anglophone norms, as projects such as "Whose Knowledge?" have addressed and work against (Brass, 2006; Waikar, 2018). During this thesis, I use my own understanding of two Indian languages (Tamil and Hindi) to examine non-English storytelling and consider the words of Indian storytellers in their own language, though the work for this project has primarily been conducted in English.

Voice, Agency and the Internet

While there has been a significant rise in considering the importance of marginalised 'voice' and the digital (Couldry, 2010; Georgiou, 2018; Risam, 2018), there is very little on online storytelling as an example of voice and agency. Yet, paradoxically, writers' livelihoods are tied inextricably to voice, or at least the illusion of having voice. It has become vogueish to speak of "giving voice" and speaking up for the "voiceless" (Sinha, 1996), and to think of the Internet as a key tool in this exercise. However, I am critical of placing *too* much emphasis on the emancipatory potential of digital technologies. Couldry refers in work to the "vastly increased opportunities enabled by digitalization" (2010, p. 140) as a significant factor in enabling future permutations of voice. He asks, "Has one building block of neoliberal thinking about the limits of democracy fallen away?" In the decade since this work was published, I argue that these hopeful questions have been replaced with more realistic considerations of how systems and societies can work with and around technologies. Yet in this thesis, there is space for a realistic and future-facing consideration of what technology can offer and provide. We know now that despite concepts of a 'global Internet', the Global North still produces much of the world's codified, transmittable knowledge online, and the Global South is largely left out of these processes (Graham, 2014). Couldry's work, written during the hopeful Obama era, with all its optimism about the power of voice, is more useful now as a reminder of the promise the Internet once held.

The Sound of Storytelling

The word *voice* is often used as "a metaphor for representation in writing" (Weidman, 2006, p. 196). It is used as a symbol of one's ability to share opinions and thoughts. Rarely does it refer to voice in a real and physical sense; the literal sound escaping one's body, the power of orality. In this thesis, I focus on orality and technology in Chapter 6, due to the primacy of oral storytelling culture and folklore in India (Gerety, 2017; Green, 2004; Handoo, 1994; Kambar, 1994) The very oldest and most sacred of Hinduism's religious texts, the Vedas, have been primarily orally transmitted from Brahmin community to Brahmin community since the 2nd millennium (Staal, 2008). In religious Hindu tradition, it is through utterance and the ritual of chanting them that their power is felt. Though this is an example specific to one (large) community in India, it represents a faith in the authority of orature and the spoken word.

Here, I write about orality not only as a projection of voice, but also of *sound;* not mere text, but all the other nonverbal expressions that are conveyed when we speak.

In a Western-dominated technological and literary landscape, written culture has emerged as not only dominant, but largely essential for global communication. Anasuya Sengupta, founder of the aforementioned organisation "Whose Knowledge?", speaks on how the lack of written knowledge in, for example, South Asian culture can mean that we have relatively literally information to cite on Wikipedia, the 'world's encyclopaedia', because of the latter's reliance on textual knowledge (Attwell, 2021). Sound has also been read (or rather, heard) as being "resistant to analysis", somehow "ineffable", which further emphasises the notion that sound cannot be easily captured and transmuted; it is "beyond words" (Steingo & Sykes, 2019), though it may contain words. This is another contributing factor in why print media and written forms of production so dominate our understanding of archives. There is an ekphrastic urge to turn sound into written word, to capture the 'ineffable' through a more precise, permanent and recognised form of analysis (Dolar, 2006). Yet isolating sound from other senses, or flattening it into something that can be neatly described by the written form, is to betray the nuances of listening; background noise, sounds that sound like something else, bad recordings, echoes; all the different ways in which sound – and crucially, technologies of sound – can interestingly shape the listening experience (Kreiman & Sidtis, 2011). Erin Anderson argues that the rise of writing "has made language increasingly silent, to simply map voice back onto language"; it disregards "voice as something more than language" (E. Anderson, 2014). We cannot simply see voice or voice recordings as being a direct transliteration of the written form, nor can we easily analyse and describe voice exactly as we would the written word. Voice has an effect beyond simply being a vehicle for words and language. Fundamentally, voice is *sound*, and our physical bodies respond to sound differently to language. Matthew Jacobson describes how listening to an emotional podcast interacts with his body; an emotive story makes him (the listener) cry, a physical reaction triggered not only by the content of the podcast but also by hearing the speaker choking up while narrating the story. Crying in this situation is a kind of empathetic response borne out of the *sound* of voice, rather than strictly the linguistic content voice relates (Jacobson, 2021, pp. 131–132).

Yet voice differs from other sounds in the potential and weight it carries for meaning: "[I]t is as if there is an arrow in it which raises the expectation of meaning, the voice is an opening

toward meaning" (Dolar, 2006, p. 74). When people speak, Dolar argues, we expect meaning; we imbue voice with more potential significance than other sounds. This is evidently not the case with every voice; voices are not equal. Whose voices do we imbue with meaning? Whose voices do we fall silent to listen to? What do people's voices, languages, and accents tell us about them, before we attempt to analyse – or even understand – what it is they are saying? Voices are bound up in gender, class, caste, power, race, nationality, and many other characteristics. At no point in history have all voices been allowed equal space or time. While writing can seek to create an illusion of distance from the writer's background and distinguishing features, voice cannot hope to even attempt such a veil. Walter J Ong's work on the subject of orality, which is central to Chapter 6 of this thesis, argues that writing is a technology; "external, alien" compared to the intuitive and personal form of speaking. Voice, on the other hand, is close, intimate, and revealing (Ong, 2003).

Chapter 6 will more closely consider the relationship between orality, storytelling, and technology in India, as well as an examination of "voice" in the literal context. The relationship between technologies and society's access to voice – from the WhatsApp voice note (Bellman, 2017) to the podcast (Locke, 2017) – has greatly shaped multimodal storytelling. Such technologies and their increasing adoption by Indian users signal the potential for new forms of storytelling, as well as the ability to collate and record cultural histories in their original languages, as I explore in Chapter 5. The hitherto limited focus on voice as simply text made oral limits the ability of creative storytellers, especially those who do not speak English, to create and disseminate their work.

Histories, Presents and Futures: The Story of India

> *"India, the new myth – a collective fiction in which anything was possible."*
>
> *Salman Rushdie, 'Midnight's Children', 1981*

An Historical Overview: India and Technology

This project focuses on India for several reasons. The relationship between India, technology and colonialism is one which predates the modern Internet. In the present era, India is known as a country which represents substantial gains for major tech platforms (Bhatia, 2016) yet is itself a burgeoning haven for local entrepreneurs. Such capitalist enterprise has its roots in the

British colonial project. British colonialism was inextricably linked to a seemingly limitless supply of easily replaceable offshore labour, which created a basic level of infrastructure in the colonies – but more importantly, linked said colonies to Britain. Gyan Prakash observes that "constituting India through empirical sciences went hand in hand with...economic linkages that drew the unified territory into a global capitalist economy" (1994, p. 1477). I choose to focus on India partially because of its unique position as the heart of Britain's Empire and its subsequent relationship with technology in the world economy. Though this historical period was marked by the use of Indian labour, Kalindi Vora observes that British colonialism in India had other aims and effects; namely, to create a new colonial class of English-speaking Indian elites, with tastes, intellect and opinions like the English. The "civilizing mission" of the British in India differs from the treatment of other colonies (Vora, 2015). Vora further argues that this history has contributed to the production of an English-speaking and Western-educated class of Indians in the present day. Vora's argument posits the idea that colonialism not only co-opted Indian labour, but attempted to Westernise colonial citizens, thus bringing them under a British 'value-system'. Such a colonial project is thus more than mere extraction of labour; it is "colonisation of the mind" (Thiong'o, 1992). The birth of the Indian elite class and their relationship with the West suggests a consistent pairing of "civilisation" with Europe, and 'Indian' traits – language, tastes – as 'lesser'.

Many decades after the British left India, this sense of Western dominance in language continued to be pervasive. The 1990s saw a period of great Internet optimism, and with it the birth of business process outsourcing. Outsourcing refers to hiring workers outside a company – and frequently, outside the country – to do work at a lower cost than would be possible within the Global North. Thus, a generation of Indian workers was created which was "cheap, easily replaceable, and servile" (Vora, 2015, p. 43). The Indian call centre, a form of outsourced American work which has since become a familiar cultural trope, is one such example of service work which is really *identity* work. Winifred Poster writes that call centre employees are required to "subsume different identities as part of the job" (2007, p. 271), a labour strategy in which ethnicity is subject to managerial control. The call centre worker would be expected to talk and think like an American, using a Western name, for the entire workday. The goal of such work is for the 'old' identity to be completely subsumed in favour of the new sleek, international, and amorphous employee. The role of such work paved the way for thinking

about an entire nation – and arguably *groups of nations* – as serving a purpose only through the absence of their own cultural identity.

This pre-history of Indian associations with technology is vital, and as Nakamura puts it, "really looking at digital media, not only seeing its images but seeing into it, into the histories of its platforms...is absolutely necessary" (2014b, p. 920). Call centre work is a process of eclipsing identity through labour – one which still exists today and indeed, has mutated into yet more concerning forms, such as content moderation labour (Field of Vision, 2017). The colonial-era work of creating an English speaking upper-class resulted in the further development of a middle-class, too, which would grow to valorise the West and the labour it offered – even if such labour was relatively menial and did not result in production for India.

Present Outlook: India and the Rise of Hindutva

While colonialism remains a lingering presence in India in many respects, new threats and considerations to the state have emerged from within the country. I refer here to Hindutva, the right-wing extremist ideology espoused by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the ruling party of India (Leidig, 2020). As Leidig traces in her work on fascism, Hindutva ideology is similar to extremist ideologies and historical movements such as Nazism or Italian Fascism, and borrows from many of the same racial and ethnonationalist logics (Leidig, 2020). The rise and subsequent validation of Hindutva by influential internal and external actors has irrevocably changed every aspect of Indian life. From the violent treatment of non-Hindus (Human Rights Watch, 2020; Ramachandran, 2020; Waikar, 2018), to freedom of speech ('India', 2023), to food choices (Jha, 2016), the spoor of Hindutva is everywhere.

It is difficult to overstate how fundamentally this has shaped and will continue to shape the country, particularly its most vulnerable citizens. The casteism and anti-Muslim sentiment that has always existed in India is now more open than ever. This inevitably shapes the voices heard from these communities, the nature of their speech, and the contexts in which it is heard. However, for this section I draw the reader to two significant phenomena which have specifically impacted and influenced choices made in this thesis. Firstly, the "Make in India" movement, an government policy launched in 2014 which aims to incentivise companies to develop products in India rather than importing them from abroad (Choudhury, 2014; Prime Minister of India, 2014). Though spearheaded as a campaign around manufacturing, the

programme extends to information technology and all areas of business. While theoretically grounded in economic needs, "Make in India" also offers citizens an opportunity to veil nationalistic attitudes and insular sentiment, as journalist Nilesh Christopher has explored (Christopher, 2020). BJP proponents have previously used the policy to argue for a "Boycott China" campaign, leading to the subsequent banning of "Chinese" apps such as TikTok and the birth of locally made dupes or alternatives (Travelli & Raj, 2024). I refer specifically to this policy because of its influence on my own decision to focus on locally made Indian storytelling platforms in this thesis. While there is reason to seek out independent companies and platforms, as I have explained, Indian nationalism is also an important contextual reason for the growth of many websites and businesses in the country. This desire to cut ties with external tech companies – while creating remarkably similar alternatives to their products – has had an impact on the sheer volume of companies and organisations being spawned in India.

Secondly, another consequence of the Hindutva movement has been its impact on narratives and stories told in India. This has specifically impacted the Bollywood film industry in Mumbai. Although this phenomenon is relatively recent, as it has been less than a decade since the BJP's rise to power and their subsequent wholesale advocacy of Hindutva, the suddenness of these industry changes is notable. Samanth Subramanian writes persuasively on the pressures on Indian filmmakers to tell patriotic stories which revise Indian history to glorify Hindu leaders and heroes (Subramanian, 2022). Subramanian extensively details the changes afoot in Bollywood, writing that "Bollywood is glutted with movies and TV shows that align with the B.J.P.'s politics." Even major global platforms such as Amazon and Netflix have been forced to concede to the BJP on aspects of their content, and have censored scenes considered taboo by the Indian Censor Board (Mitra, 2020; Raj & Gettleman, 2021). The extreme pushback from the Indian government on Bollywood is tacit confirmation that narratives and storytelling are of key political importance, and that the BJP wish to use this large mouthpiece to communicate with its populace. These changes, like this right-wing India, are relatively nascent. Their effect on the stories I study, and the platforms researched in this thesis, are consequently of varying strength. Yet given the trajectory of India's fascist turn, it seems inevitable that this "right-washing" of India's history and storytelling industries will also impact text-based stories. I argue that it is not only important to do this work, but to do so now, as this is a crucial – and frightening– juncture in India's history and present. The glut of patriotic, jingoistic Indian content represents the immense power of storytelling to shape and influence

society. This relationship between protectionist technology policies and right-wing narrative building provides a rich contextual backdrop to consider the storytelling platforms of this DPhil project, and the impact they might have on Indian society.

Stories are bound up in questions and dilemmas of voice and agency, creativity, and labour, the political and the personal. This thesis combines these themes and looks towards a future of Indian storytelling platforms and those who contribute to them, as well as the processes and passions that drive such labour. Fittingly, this thesis aims to redefine our understanding of the relationship between reader and writer in digital storytelling; I position myself as both writer of this thesis and reader of the stories that inspire it.

Chapter 3. Ways of Seeing: Closeness in/as Methodology

> *"Seeing comes before words."*
>
> *John Berger, Ways of Seeing, 1972*

In this chapter, I explore the methodology and research design of this thesis. I define my research questions and detail the specific methods which are used to answer these. This chapter also expands on some of the challenges I found in conceiving the early design of this project, which was stymied and ultimately reworked due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Alongside these methodological considerations, I centre my own positionality as a researcher as being inextricable from the work I have undertaken. My identity as an Indian woman and my multidisciplinary background irrevocably shapes the lens this thesis proffers to the reader. I consider my own personal experience and the academic disciplines that shape this work as different *ways of seeing,* different strategies to make meaning out of the stories I have read and the phenomena I explore. Though this chapter serves as a methodological description, it is also a discussion on learning to see, and how qualitative research can benefit from seeing closely, deeply, and intimately.

Disciplinary Beginnings, and Learning to See

> *...the Indian writer, looking back at India, does so through guilt-tinted spectacles. (I am, of course, once more, talking about myself.) I am speaking now of those of us who emigrated ... and I suspect that there are times when the move seems wrong to us all, when we seem, to ourselves, postlapsarian men and women...Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools ... but however ambiguous and shifting this ground may be, it is not an infertile territory for a writer to occupy. If literature is in part the business of finding new angles at which to enter reality,*

> *then once again our distance, our long geographical perspective, may provide us with such angles.*
>
> (Rushdie, 1982*)*

One of the early points of inspiration for this thesis was British-Indian writer Salman Rushdie's collection of essays, *Imaginary Homelands* (1982). In the titular essay, Rushdie writes of the challenges of being an expatriate Indian writer looking "back" at India, and writing a novel which seeks to represent India without being doomed to simply *describe* the country. It is fitting, therefore, that in looking back on the work of this thesis, I find myself turning to this essay once more, and recognising how apt these words are as a description of my own work. I am myself an Indian writer and researcher who has left India, and it is this similarity that first drew me to Rushdie's essay. Yet Rushdie's words are also highly applicable to the academic quandary of straddling two (or more) disciplinary cultures. Having been trained as a literary scholar, I found myself with both a "plural and partial" set of tools and experiences with which to approach a project such as this. There are versions of this thesis that are purely literary in scope, or even purely sociological. Yet, as Rushdie expresses, it is the "ambiguous, shifting ground" of this project's disciplinary focus that contributes to its fruitfulness. This thesis is focused on the "shifting", fertile ground of interdisciplinary work, combining such fields as postcolonial literature, sociology, cultural studies, media studies, anthropology, feminist theory, and the broad lens of Internet studies. Through the use of multiple methods, I am concerned with the business of 'finding new angles at which to enter reality'; that is, finding new ways to explore the digital cultures and platforms explored in this work. While I have often felt caught between two, or several, academic cultures and disciplines, the field of cultural studies does capture some of these pluralities and partialities. Cultural studies considers, as Stuart Hall argues, "experience lived, experience interpreted, experience defined." (2016, p. 135) This thesis has evolved from being a tentative relationship between two disciplines – literature and media studies – to being more firmly rooted in cultural studies. Yet it still borrows freely from other traditions and academic fields. As Rushdie writes somewhat wryly later in the essay, "it is perhaps one of the more pleasant freedoms of the literary migrant to be able to choose his parents." I have thus not let the rigidity of academic traditions or disciplinary expectations stymy the methods and frameworks developed in this thesis. In this sense, I have chosen my own parents: the academic heritage of this work.

Rushdie also describes here how distance from one's subject may allow new angles and ways of understanding, different *ways of seeing*. It is the interplay between the close and the distant that defines "the expatriate Indian writer, looking back at India". I myself consider this relationship in terms of academic tools; the wide, broad scope of anthropology's desire to understand, to experience, with the narrow and focused reading that literary analysis can offer, with its precise focus on text. Though there is distance in in this thesis, too, I am largely occupied with closeness: close sight, close detail, and familiarity. In this chapter, I advocate for closeness in multiple thematic and methodological forms. The freighted question of closeness versus distance is highly relevant to literary studies, specifically computational literary studies. Distant reading, as popularised by Franco Moretti, relies heavily on the use of big data to understand large corpuses of text (Moretti, 2013). This methodology has led to a more existential disciplinary question of what reading literature is or is not. There has accordingly been much criticism of the placement or *mis*placement of the computational in the literary (Bode, 2017; Brennan, 2017; Marche, 2012) which speaks to an anxiety of losing "pure" literature. In arguing for close (rather than distant) reading, I am not speaking to this specific anxiety or disciplinary argument, seeking instead to redefine what closeness can mean and offer methodologically. Yet this question of close versus distant reading is impossible to ignore in its entirety, and in this thesis I seek to move away from the "impersonal invisible hand" of computational literary scholarship (Trumpener, 2009). This is not because of a "hermeneutics of suspicion towards mechanization [and] digitization" (Tenen, 2017, p. 184), but rather a desire to prise more out of the topic of digitisation than simply large-scale computational practices. This thesis is entirely absorbed with the digital, but I argue that such a focus does not have to come at the cost of an immersion in culture and a closeness with both text and people.

In 'Imaginary Homelands', Rushdie also describes his limitations in being able to write about India, as someone outside it. I feel these limitations too. There are many aspects of Indian life, and especially *certain Indian lives,* that no one outside can perceive, understand, or document. But, like the storyteller, the qualitative researcher – myself – is not aiming for "whole sight". After all, as Rushdie reminds us:

> *...human beings do not perceive things whole; we are not gods but wounded creatures, cracked lenses, capable only of fractured perceptions. Meaning is a shaky*

> *edifice we build out of scraps, dogmas, childhood injuries, newspaper articles, chance remarks, old films, small victories, people hated, people loved...*
>
> *(Rushdie, 1982)*

Anthropological research, particularly ethnographic study, recognises the partiality of sight that is possible in such work. One cannot take oneself 'out' of the field, nor is it desirable to do so when the relationship of the researcher with their context is so interesting, and so conducive to building human connections (Behar, 2022). As Ann Oakley argues, the notion of distant, dispassionate and scientific research, is one that has long been upheld as the standard for research (Oakley, 1981). Feminist theory such as Oakley's offers us an alternative mode of doing research. This bias, or *partial sightedness,* is not, as Rushdie argues, a limitation. No research project can hope for wholeness. Jennifer Robertson observes that the metaphor of the mirror as a noun and verb was frequently used in anthropological writing to suggest the work of the researcher in reflecting what they see. As she points out, however, "a mirror is not an inert device" and can be deployed in different ways (2002, p. 786) I suggest that the work of the interdisciplinary researcher is in ***learning to see*** in different ways; partially, closely, distantly, through cracked lenses, with whatever tools we have to help us. As Rushdie describes so eloquently, it is the work of the writer to shape meaning out of fragments.

Of course, in the above passages, Rushdie is also trying very hard to justify his own position as a British writer writing about India. Specifically, his essay responds to criticism that he should not lay claim to knowing India or being Indian, having left the country as a child. These are not baseless concerns, in literature or in research, and I address these points further in my *Positionality* section. The central role one's identity plays in research is of great importance, though as Oakley notes, scientific research often attempts to subjugate identity as much as possible and to treat the researcher as a data-gathering machine. What productive work and rich angles of analysis may emerge if we, conversely, see the researcher's identity as being central to the story they are writing; as offering another angle with which to see?

Research Design: Under the Magnifying Glass

> *Suppose yourself in a large cinema, sitting at first in the back row, and gradually moving up ... until your nose is almost pressed against the screen. Gradually the*

> *stars' faces dissolve into dancing grain; tiny details assume grotesque proportions …*
>
> *(Rushdie, 2008)*

In Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children* (first published 1981), the protagonist Saleem describes the experience of looking first distantly, then very closely, at the cinema screen. Saleem sees the same image, but looked at from different angles, and in different ways, it becomes completely new. What seemed small and unimportant from afar becomes enormous. Yet without an aide to his vision, Saleem sees these "dancing grains" as "grotesque", surreal and unintelligible. Without knowing what he is meant to be seeing, that which is familiar becomes unrecognisable. This example gestures not only to the ways that closeness and distance can fundamentally change an object, but also how central the body is in experiencing and perceiving surroundings. I consider this primacy of perception and the body as an interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's work on the centrality of perceiving and seeing in understanding the world (Merleau-Ponty & Landes, 2012). The body is the way the researcher experiences the world, with whatever limitations, challenges, and sights it offers. In this section, I expand further on the metaphor of magnification, and the tools the researcher must use to help make sense of close and magnified data, in order to understand and interpret it.

Before I explain my research design, I must note that the original plan for this thesis was once quite different. In 2019, and even early into 2020, I had envisioned going to India to undertake fieldwork in person. I had planned a more typically situated ethnography, where I would be located in Bangalore and based out of the offices of a digital publishing platform, like Pratilipi, or Juggernaut Books, both explored in Chapter 4. In this way, I hoped my project would be a situated study that focused not only on digital storytelling, but the culture of producing and maintaining the apps which host it.

The limitations of the body as the site of perception have perhaps been brought into stark relief by the COVID-19 pandemic. This work was in an advanced planning stage before it became apparent that the pandemic was to have a longer impact than I (naively, perhaps) had imagined. The 2021 wave of COVID-19 had a devastating impact on India, and I did not wish to endanger my participants by insisting on their in-person presence for interviews or participant observation. Indeed, the pandemic has had a much longer-lasting impact on

workplace culture, and specifically expectations of employees being present in person (Bick et al., 2023; Kramer & Kramer, 2020). Thus, this methodology had to be reformulated in the wake of the ruptures that the pandemic created. As a result, a great deal of this work was produced, reformatted, and changed. As anyone who was planning research during the pandemic can attest to, this was an extremely challenging time, as well as being fraught with concern for my family members in India.

Yet the inability to be present in India in-person also offered new opportunities for research design, and new avenues of inquiry. Later in this chapter, I discuss how the interruptions which characterised the early stages of this work later set the stage for the use of case studies. This thesis takes a qualitative approach, using multiple different methods to understand how readers and writers in India use digital storytelling platforms to tell stories. I set out to understand and analyse several discursive areas: the stories themselves, the platforms that facilitated these stories, and the writers and platform employees (i.e., the people) behind these works. Thus, my thesis draws on three sources of data. To do so, I merged content analysis of text and images with more ethnographic methods, namely interviews and platform walkthroughs. Although I describe the analysis of texts as *content analysis* or alternatively *discourse analysis* (Fairclough, 2001), such a method in literary studies is typically less formulated and procedural. I refer to my use of textual analysis as *literary analysis,* a broad term for the literary methodologies at work in this thesis which references the literary qualities of the work I examine. I have been struck by how similar many of these methods were to practices and tools I had used in my training as a literature student. In this sense, disciplinary boundaries ceased to be divisions between epistemologies; rather these dividing boundaries merged, allowing flexible and porous cross-pollination of methods, methodologies, and theories. These methods have been selected because they allowed me to explore numerous *ways of seeing*, as describe in the opening to this chapter. The methods I used and their relationship with seeing closely are shown in Figure 2. I centred this diagram on the image of a magnifying glass as depicted in Figure 1, which provides detail on the metaphor of seeing closely.

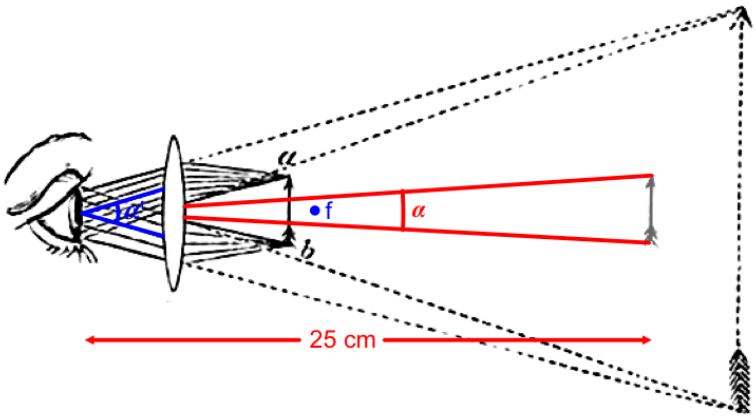

Figure 1 A single lens magnifying glass and its formulation of an image

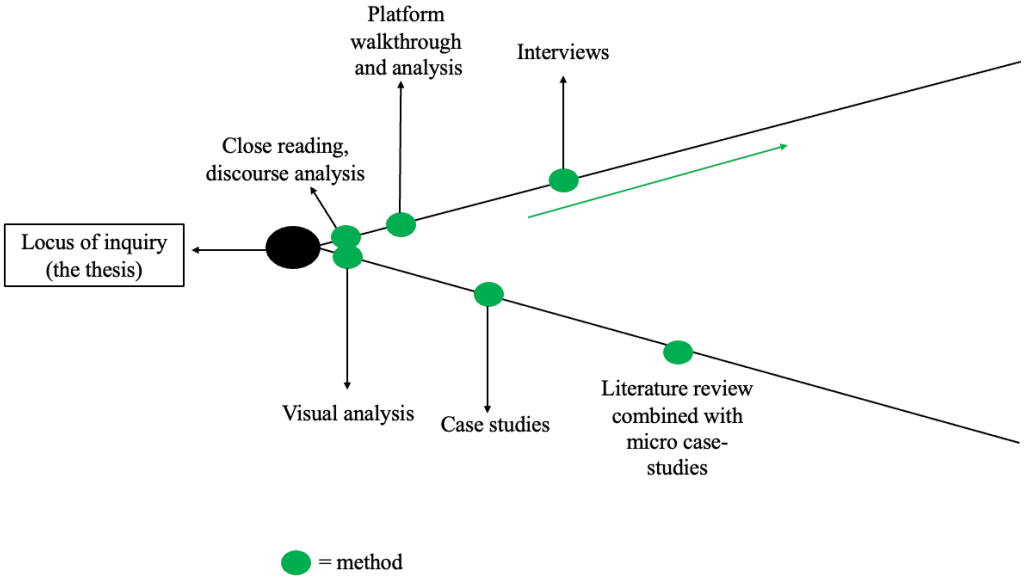

Figure 2 A diagram showing methods as multiple ways of looking at an object; in this case, the phenomena and object of digital storytelling platforms in India

Figure 1 is based on how magnifying glasses or convex lenses formulate images[2]. Magnification allows the user of the lens to see items closely. The thesis in this metaphor works as the magnifying glass, allowing its user to see objects more closely and in richer detail. I have placed methods along the line as dots to indicate their emphasis on closeness or distance.

[2] This is a metaphor used to explain modes of seeing in this thesis, rather than a truly scientific explanation of how magnifying glasses work. Thus, there follow some creative liberties and simplifications of the process of magnification.

The magnifying glass can also be held further away to look at a broader, wider picture. Magnifying glasses allow its users to access different perceptions and images by acting as an aide to vision. They are, in this sense, the tool that Saleem, in his close look at the cinema screen, needs to see deeper.

Looking at my diagram above (Figure 1) I depict the thesis as the *magnifying glass* examining an object, or rather a phenomenon (not pictured): digital storytelling in India. In general, I have favoured methods which prioritise closeness, yet it is the blend of seeing closely and seeing from a greater distance that make this thesis rich. For example, close reading or content analysis are – of course – *close methods* because they focus specifically on one image or text at a time. The range or scope of the content may be small, but this only amplifies the focus one places on the object, analysing it in great depth. The closeness of this inquiry allows an intimate understanding of a phenomena or object. The term *closeness* is twofold, suggesting both a near proximity and a familiarity; the latter is borne of the former. Familiarity and deep understanding are a benefit of "close" methods. Researchers often takes pains to argue that their work is free from bias (Morse et al., 2002), possibly as a result of a funding landscape that plays increasing prominence on replicable, representative and "impactful" research that can be scaled up (Galdas, 2017). I argue in this thesis that closeness can, as seen in Figure 1, offer just another *way of seeing* that distance and determined neutrality cannot. In close methods, details and intricacies that cannot be seen from afar are important. I note here that close looking and close reading `are methods with specific historical significance and practice: namely, they ask that all context and historical intent are stripped from the object in a text (Brooks, 1947; Eliot, 1997; B. H. Smith, 2016). Ironically, doing so repeats the scientific repudiation and fear of bias; in both cases, identity (whether of the viewer or its creator) is considered inconvenient. I therefore reframe the conventional ideas of "close reading" or "close looking" here as *reading closely* or *looking closely,* and moreover being close with one's research. Close in this sense means attention to detail; it means putting up a magnifying glass and looking at platforms, texts and people with care. This homonym – *care,* and *carefully* – also represents an important aspect of closeness in research. It is necessary to take care, to look carefully and diligent, and to show care in dealing with human participants and relationships.

In *looking carefully* throughout this thesis, I also seek to repudiate the fascination with speed that has come to characterise the digital age, as Wacjman argues (Wacjman, 2014). Speed is

"sexy", and doing things quickly is seen as essential in a capitalist system focused on making life "productive" (Tadiar, 2012). As Anna Kornbluh argues, *immediacy* is a defining feature of contemporary life, a "hurry-hurry" that connotes urgency (2024, p. 19). Wacjman and Kornbluh all link this speed with late capitalism, or "too late" capitalism, as Kornbluh wryly refers to it. Close looking, which necessitates slow, long perspectives and analyses, is thus a form of resistance to a system which demands hastiness, quick thoughts, and rush, a neoliberal fetishization of too much work and not enough time (Berg & Seeber, 2016). The postcolonial subject writing, speaking, and defining themselves, is a reclaiming of power and agency (Ashcroft et al., 2002; Boehmer, 2018). Paying close attention and giving time to such writing is also a way of imbuing such work with power and value.

We need to look closely at Indian digital culture, just as qualitative research has long looked closely at digital sub-cultures in the West. In this thesis, I focused specifically on platforms which were made in India, and which are often much smaller than larger storytelling websites or platforms such as Wattpad, Kindle, or big tech alternatives. This was deliberate. There has been a great deal of work (and rightly so) which looks at storytelling as something large-scale, produced on enormous platforms (Burgess & Green, 2018; Evans et al., 2017). Yet in only looking distantly, writers may unwittingly, yet invariably, reform narratives of Indian storytelling such that big tech companies, and major global platforms, become the *only* arbiters of creative work in India. This is untrue, and vastly underestimates the amount of work, innovation (Irani, 2019) and inspiration happening in India in relation to storytelling, past and present (Arora, 2019). In writing about this creative work, and these myriad digital cultures, I sought to show how integral these creative acts are to Indian media futures and presents. Writing about something alone may not make it important[3], but writing does have the ability to bring into clarity ideas and experiences which otherwise may be in shadowy, dim focus.

As the field of vision widens in the diagram above, the methods become slightly more distant. In the case of my thesis, this means that there were more points of data. From a single story or image, I moved to a walkthrough of a single platform, to case studies of two platforms and

[3]From Little Women (2019), adapted for the screen and directed by Greta Gerwig.

JO MARCH: No, writing doesn't confer importance, it reflects it.

AMY MARCH: I'm not sure. Perhaps writing will <u>make</u> them more important.

writer communities, to interviews with 23 writers and employees working on digital storytelling, to, finally, a theoretical chapter which concludes by consolidating my knowledge into a final, distant perspective on orality as past, present, and future of technology-facilitated storytelling. This final chapter examines the phenomenon of the oral tradition in India, as mediated by technologies over millennia of use. I look closely at specific phenomena to consider whether the prominence of voice – as in *sound* – in Indian culture reflect the importance of speaking and being heard, in relation to Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak's influential essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) This thesis thus places a close examination of digital platforms alongside a wider consideration of form, agency, and power in storytelling.

Research Questions	Chapter(s)	Methods
1. How do users of Indian digital storytelling platforms use these platforms to tell stories and communicate ideas?	4,5	Close reading, discourse analysis, interviews, case study, visual analysis
2. Why do these Indian users use digital storytelling platforms?	4	Interviews, case study
3. What affordances or contexts of these digital storytelling platforms shape storytelling by Indian users?	5	Platform walkthrough and analysis, case study
What makes technology-facilitated storytelling in India important?	6	Triangulating and summarising findings from all sources, literature review

Table 1: The table above outlines my research questions alongside the methods used to address them, while indicating which chapters these research questions are explored in.

Research Questions

To summarise my methodology and its uses as they correspond to the questions I ask in this thesis, I present Table 1 above. The central question that drove this work was: "Why are digital storytelling platforms in India unique and important?" This is a version of the old but

useful *so what?* question (Agee, 2009) so pertinent to social science research. There is one crucial difference here, however. *So what?* assumes there may not be important or interesting answers to this question. My overarching question, however, frames digital storytelling as something that *is* important; this thesis is an exploration of some of the ways in which it is so. I deliberately chose to do this because I did not want this thesis to be a simple and reductive debate about whether digital storytelling has value or not. Rather, I reframe this discussion to a series of questions on *how* value is constituted. Who is digital storytelling important *for? How* is digital storytelling made important? What *kind* of importance does it have? My central thesis question is thus provocative in its conceptual framing. It builds on several research questions which are addressed by the individual chapters in this project.

Positionality: Research Approach

Although research questions are a fundamental part of social science research, my background in studying literature had been somewhat divorced from this. Literary studies traditionally eschews the necessity of research questions as an over-systemisation of the research process which can impede the more flexuous, authoritative and creative aspects of writing and arguing. In literary studies, the persuasiveness of the argument *is* the research. As Rushdie, via Saleem, argues wryly in *Midnight's Children*, "in autobiography, as in all literature, what actually happened is less important than what the author can manage to persuade his audiences to believe..." (2008, p. 341). The same can be true of much research about literature, which is typically not dictated by metrics, though distant reading methods do use scale and computational methods to analyse text (Moretti, 2013). The literary researcher does not seek to prove and disprove a hypothesis in the form of a research question, but rather to answer a provocation, which is less explicit than a question. Qualitative social science research uses research questions not only to focus inquiry, but also because questioning is a natural response to understanding the lives and processes of others (Agee, 2009). The asking and, just as importantly, the *development* of research questions, helps create research that is dynamic and relevant.

Positionality: "Double Perspective"

> *Indian writers in these islands...are capable of writing from a kind of double perspective: because they – we – are at one and the same time insiders and*

> *outsiders in this society. This stereoscopic vision is perhaps what we can offer in place of 'whole sight'.*
>
> *(Rushdie, 1982)*

My positionality as a researcher has been further influenced by my personal identity as well as my disciplinary background; namely, the distance between myself and my subjects. Salman Rushdie spends much of the essay 'Imaginary Homelands' defending and valorising distance. According to Rushdie, it is "our long geographical perspective" which offers us new angles to enter reality. Distance is certainly in line with ideas on what "good" sociological research should be: detached, free from bias and scrupulously neutral (Morse et al., 2002). Yet I embrace the "phenomenological attitude" that Linda Finlay suggests; from the start, my research has been about "a passion that is turned into a research question" (2013, p. 173). Not only is closeness rich and productive, but sometimes even *necessary* to produce good research: "One learns to know only what one loves, and the deeper and fuller the knowledge is to be, the more powerful and vivid must be . . . the passion" (Binswanger, 1963, p. 176). Ann Oakley discusses this at length in her work, noting that when interviewer and interviewee have similar experiences or backgrounds, forming a friendship is inevitable. The ethics of this "friendship" depend, of course, on the contexts of the research project and power dynamics between the researcher and their participants (Oakley, 1981). *Closeness* in any context must never come at the cost of research ethics and the protection of participants, and researcher's desire for closeness is secondary to the participants' endorsement of this. However, my experience certainly reflects and affirms many of Oakley's points; namely, that there are benefits to closeness which can make the research experience smoother for both parties.

I am an Indian woman who was inspired to write this thesis based heavily on my own lived experience and observations of Indian storytelling culture and the boom in Indian apps over the last decade. I grew up in an Indian family, with Indian friends and Indian cultural experiences – from the food I ate to the music I listened to, and, perhaps most importantly, to the languages I spoke and heard alongside English. I grew up reading all kinds of stories from India and the rest of the world. It is inescapable that these myriad identities have found their way into both the conception and the writing of this thesis. Although researchers with similar identities to their participants may experience conflicting and complex dilemmas of "insider privilege" and the production of an "authentic self" for interviewing purposes (Ozkazanc-Pan,

2012), I found this less challenging. Firstly, this was because I saw closeness, as detailed in earlier sections, as a *series* of methods, not all of which involve participant interaction. Ozkazanc-Pan describes the complex role of the "native" researcher in describing and writing about her home country, which is both familiar to her but also foreign when seen through the lens of the Western academy (2012, p. 583). The researcher thus presents several different identities (Goffman, 1959) over the course of the project. However, in my case, as my ethnographic study was digital and comprised only part of my data collection, I did not experience the instability and constant performance of the situated researcher. Secondly, as my interviews largely did not involve sensitive or political questions, I could occupy a friendlier space than most researchers find themselves able to. I expand on this in my *Interviewing* section. Finally, and crucially, I myself developed a comfort over the course of this thesis with the shifting nature of my identity. As Sabrina Magliocco writes of being an outsider or an insider, it was "perfectly obvious to me that I [was] both" (2004, p. 15). As a researcher, it is important to navigate these performances and accept the multiplicity of identities produced across a project. Rushdie writes of the "double perspective" afforded to writers who are both insiders and outsiders, suggesting it is what makes up for the lack of 'wholeness' in perspective. This *stereoscopic vision* rightly gestures to the productivity, rather than the partiality, of limiting scope.

Though there have been challenges in deploying some of my methods, I believe my attitude to close research and in embracing my own positionality as a relative insider have offered new and varied ways to see which have been central to my research design and methods.

Research Methods

Interviewing

The use of interviews as a participant-centric method of data collection offered many interesting ways to establish closeness and co-create knowledge. COVID-19 shaped and changed the nature of this work, causing me to spend a year reframing this thesis such that it was entirely digital and would not require in-person fieldwork which could cause harm to the participants and communities I was studying – as well as to myself. The reframing of this project meant that my data collection was iterative, rather than continuous, and I spent the first two years of this thesis changing my plans. This disjointed process was challenging but

emerged as a result of the confusion, ever-changing health advice, and concerns of the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in India, where the impact of the crisis was particularly severe.

I began the process of identifying platforms by conducting an initial literature review on storytelling platforms in India, largely using Google Search and newspaper articles from Indian media publications, since there is limited or no academic literature on the platforms in this thesis. I also followed these companies on social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, which gave me an indication of how prolific or active they were. I spoke to friends and contacts from India to understand how their reading habits encapsulated (or did not encapsulate) digital storytelling platforms. From this initial research, I built a profile of several storytelling websites and then began the process of finding participants who were connected with these platforms. Overall, I successfully interviewed 23 interviewees. This was an iterative, nonlinear process; my initial interviews informed my choices of later interviewees. After the first few interviews, and through reconsiderations of my research questions, my later interview questions changed, and I adjusted my approach over time.

Recruitment

I recruited participants by directly identifying employees and executives at Juggernaut and at Pratilipi and reaching out to then. Discussions of these platforms and more detailed insights about them can be found in Chapter 4. Having identified these two platforms specifically, I reached out to participants who worked at these companies to better understand the processes of not only writing digital stories, but also of editing, curating, and creating homes for these stories. I also interviewed storytellers and writers themselves, in order to understand how technology facilitated or impacted their creative practice.

Some of the interviewees I spoke to were also industry professionals at different companies, for a few reasons. Firstly, the Juggernaut team is relatively small, and as a publishing start-up in a busy Indian market, experiences a high level of turnover. Key members of the team were thus subject to change, and during the period in which I undertook this thesis, several important team members left and were replaced. Sometimes I would reach out to an employee, only to find that they were leaving the company or were shortly to leave. I thus relied more on the Pratilipi team to share their experiences, given the larger size of this company, and the

fact that the Pratilipi app is currently still active. During this time period, the digital Juggernaut app was removed from the app store and has subsequently not returned. Several new team members were thus unable to talk directly about the digital platform but could speak more broadly to trade publishing in India and the impact of 'digital storytelling' in an Indian context.

Secondly, and relatedly, these interviews helped me realise that the interview process could be a productive opportunity to speak to professionals and storytellers about digital storytelling in a wider, non-platform specific context. Though the Pratilipi app is a major source of digital storytelling in India, it is by no means the only platform that aims to produce and share digital stories, nor do I seek to depict it as the sole locus of this practice in India. I also expanded this interview search to speak to some professionals in the broader digital storytelling space in India. *Digital storytelling* is filled with intersections of form and content, and this thesis likewise examines storytelling in oral, visual, textual, recorded, and acoustic forms. Digital storytelling practitioners, too, rarely obey disciplinary boundaries. The interviewees I spoke to were similarly fluid in their work; many people I spoke to "wore several hats" in their work and in their understanding of digital storytelling. For example, I spoke to writers of textual stories who were also expanding into podcasts and audiobooks or looking to turn their stories into films. The porous boundaries between digital storytelling forms and platforms indicated that it would be fruitful to expand the interview search such that platforms were not a limiting factor in recruitment. Table 1 shows the participant breakdown by workplace.

Workplace	Numbers
Commercial platform	12
Freelance writer	5
Digital archive	3
Other	3

Table 2 A table indicating the participant breakdown by workplace

As table 1 indicates, most of my participants were employees from a commercial platform. Many of these employees were themselves writers of or contributors to the stories on the platform they worked for. The commercial platforms I examined were Juggernaut, Pratilipi, Kuku FM and Pocket FM. The latter two are audio series platforms based in India; this is a theme returned to in Chapter 6. Freelance writers were not loyal to a specific platform but

had written for one or more in their career. The freelance writers I spoke to had all published via Pratilipi, Juggernaut. The digital archive interviewees had all built archives which collected stories – primarily folklore. This work is particularly featured in Chapters 5 and 6. Finally, I also spoke to two Indian journalists and one academic based in India who had written about digital archives or storytelling in India previously and were instructive in understanding the current landscape. This interview list does not include the hundreds of emails, messages, and WhatsApp messages that I sent and received in discussion with a host of other potential interview candidates, or helpful contacts who helped me get in touch with some of these interviewees.

I first found participants by following Juggernaut and Pratilipi on social media, specifically Instagram, Facebook, and LinkedIn. I concentrated on the latter platform, which, as a professional networking site and service, offers users an opportunity to find members of an industry, or employees of a company, with relative ease. Though somewhat understudied in academic contexts as a participant recruitment tool, the platform has several functions which make it well-suited for this task particularly if one is searching for professional (that is, non-personal) connections. It is possible to search for people by their role and/or their biography with key words – e.g., digital storytelling – and message people without being directly connected with them. LinkedIn's social norms also play a role in this. As a platform designed for networking and connecting with professionals, it is not considered particularly invasive or unusual to add 'strangers', provided there is a clear reason for doing so. Compared to platforms such as Facebook, where friends are established social acquaintances (Stokes et al., 2019), it is normal to send an introductory note to a stranger if one has a reason to connect with them. As this study is centred around Internet and specifically smartphone usage, I deduced that users of digital storytelling platforms would be more likely to also use their smartphone regularly for other tools, such as LinkedIn. Research on social media recruitment also indicates that its immediacy and the instant connection it forms between participant and researcher (Stokes et al., 2019) can be helpful in getting quick responses. However, one potential disadvantage of using LinkedIn was that I had to use my real digital profile to reach out to interviewees. It would have been inauthentic to use a false profile and potentially sent the wrong signal to my interviewees (Marwick, 2005), since "authenticity", in all its complexity, is so highly valued on social networks.

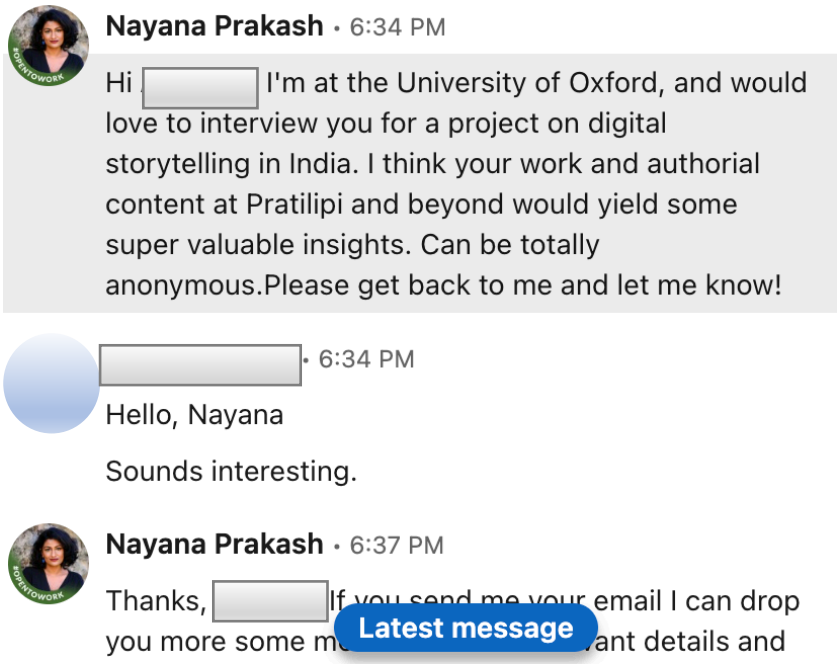

Figure 3 An example of a message I sent to a Pratilipi writer and employee I found on Linkedin. Names and the participant's profile image have been blurred

In addition to the search function on LinkedIn, I also used snowball sampling (Noy, 2008) to find and interview other participants. I asked my first few interviewees (who were primarily Juggernaut employees) to suggest other people I could speak to in the same space, and if possible, to provide an introduction. This method was helpful in identifying key people in this field; repeated names indicated the suggested participant had a strong relationship with digital storytelling and would be a useful contact. In this way, the snowball sampling method also provided a helpful indication of key players in the field, or at least key names for these companies. Snowball sampling through participants was also a helpful way of identifying interviewees who may not be active on LinkedIn or social media (Browne, 2005).

There were nevertheless many challenges in recruiting participants remotely. The COVID-19 pandemic made in-person participant recruitment impossible. Remote recruitment, which is now nearly essential in a world of hybrid or remote working, requires the formation of relationships which can be very difficult to form digitally. It is also more socially acceptable to ignore emails and LinkedIn requests than messages from someone one knows in real life. Although many participants did reply to me, and were enthusiastic to speak, it was equally common to receive no response at all, even if I had an introduction to the person in question. Some participants would respond enthusiastically and suggest dates, but then cease

communication and simply vanish before the interview. This is not entirely surprising. While I used my real profile on LinkedIn to establish authenticity, I was still sending a cold email to an unknown person. As such, it is entirely possible for users to ignore messages altogether or to be "ghosted", a particularly common phenomenon in an era of digital relationship building, particularly with short-term interactions (Jonason et al., 2021). At Juggernaut in particular, the small size of the company meant that during busy periods –such as the (relatively frequent) departure of a team member, or the publication of a major title, or during the two maternity leave periods that the company's CEO took during this thesis – it was very difficult to communicate with the team at all. While it was sometimes possible for persistent messaging and emailing to eventually lead to a conversation, I was mindful of antagonising busy interviewees. I also learned that participants who responded more enthusiastically to my recruitment were also more likely to make ample time for interviews, rather than attempting to fit a brief perfunctory conversation in between other commitments.

Despite these setbacks, there were several features of my project that made participant recruitment easier. Firstly, the nature of this chapter was to try and understand digital storytelling, and to analyse the impact of technology on reading and writing habits in India. This meant that the discussions I had were rarely sensitive or likely to be controversial. Indeed, a few participants admitted to me that they very much enjoyed these discussions, specifically being treated like an expert in their field, and in being able to talk about the intricacies of storytelling as an occupation in India. My focus on amateur writers meant that many participants were happy to help and to boost the profile of their writing or the platform they work for. As one participant said to me affectionately, "people who work in publishing really like to gossip". Another participant revealed she was proud to be asked these questions; as someone who had once been a stay-at-home mother without a career, she was delighted to be able to share her story and be in a position to answer my questions. Additionally, keeping my recruitment criteria broad was important, as it allowed me to speak to a wider range of people; narrow eligibility for interviewing can significantly reduce the likelihood of getting any responses at all (Negrin et al., 2022; Price et al., 2020). Once in an interview, I found participants to be eager to speak and willing to expound upon their ideas.

The Interview Process

Interviewee recruitment was a large and time-consuming part of this process, and indeed any qualitative research process, though this is not often given attention in research projects or instruction (Price et al., 2020). However, there were aspects of this project that made the actual experience of interviewing more streamlined and fluent. I used narrative interviewing as an approach to this work. Narrative interviewing, fittingly, provides a space for interviewees to share stories and anecdotes in their answers, veering from a more structured and linear form of questioning towards one centred on personal reflections about the topic (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004). As a result, my questions often deviated from interviewee to interviewee, following the participant's lead on what they wanted to speak about, even if this led to longer interviews. In this way, my interviews sometimes felt more like discussions or stories that the interviewee and I were co-constructing (Mahoney, 2007). I chose semi-structured interviews so that I could ask open-ended questions and did not have to stick to a rigid path, while also being able to gently lead interviewees back to the topic as and when needed (Flick et al., 2004). I recorded interviews on my laptop and securely stored them, assigning a pseudonym to each participant, though many said this was not essential from their perspective because they were proud of their work (and that of the platform they were employed by) and were happy to share their thoughts relatively publicly. This may have also been an indication of the trust that participants had in me. I have nevertheless used pseudonyms throughout this thesis in order to preserve a disciplinary standard and to ensure participants are protected through their contribution to this work. There are two exceptions to this. The founders of Voices of Rural India and LoreKeepers, discussed in chapters 5 and 6 respectively, are named during this thesis, with their specific oral consent. Their roles as the founders of these archives made their identities important to disclose, as it so impacted their responses to my questions. During all the interviews, I made notes of any particularly interesting or striking points the participants made and wrote these down in a physical journal that I had on-hand. I later reflected on the points in the journal as well as the points in the recorded interview.

While conducting interviews, I experienced some level of insider privilege (Oakley, 1981), which facilitated the process. As an Indian woman who speaks two Indian languages (Hindi and Tamil) to varying degrees, I was aware of the cultural norms and references which were often made, sometimes unconsciously. Interviewees could, for example, reference works or cultural

examples in an Indian language (this happened multiple times) without needing to pause to explain these to me. Furthermore, one of my interviewees, whose digital storytelling work is often in Hindi, spent much of her interview speaking in that language or in *Hinglish*[4], which I was able to follow and translate based on my familiarity with it. She noted at the beginning of the interview that she would sometimes revert to Hindi, despite being a confident English speaker, due to her experience in telling stories in that language. Her reversion to Hindi for parts of the interview reflects how the interview became a kind of co-constructed story between us. I was able to listen and question her without interrupting her chosen language. Other interviewees, too, relied on Hindi at times to explain a point, or suggest a cultural reference. This aspect of insider interviewing was an important rationale for my project. Interviewing is often an onus on participants, and one which yields very little for the person interviewed if they are outside the academic sphere. By making interviews as easy as possible for interviewees – in scheduling Zoom interviews, allowing them to switch between languages, and not interrupting them when they did so – I tried to make this process less disruptive and more intuitive for those interviewed. In doing so, I made clear the idea of meeting participants where they are; that is, going out to my participants and finding ways to make this process simple, non-taxing, and even enjoyable for them where possible.

The interview process was particularly useful because it allowed me to directly ask my participants for their opinions; to privilege their ideas, and to discard the "hierarchy of credibility" (Becker, 1970) whereby the researcher knows more than the participants. In my case, one of the challenges of writing this thesis has been the lack of verifiable and citable knowledge, a problem that is reflected in the lack of Indian cultural content on, for example, websites such as Wikipedia (Prabhala, 2011). Interviews allowed me and my participants to build our own collaborative knowledge together, to create references, and furthermore to co-author a story. This type of shared storytelling practice is particularly important and necessary with a topic such as mine, which has not been captured in academic research before.

I enjoyed conducting these interviews very much. I did not explicitly pursue friendship with my participants, but we are nevertheless *connected,* a word that has come to encapsulate much of modern digital networking and relationship-building (Christakis & Fowler, 2009). We are

[4] A vernacular language which blends Hindi and English

still LinkedIn connections, which means that we know what the other person is up to. One of my participants, a woman a few years younger than I am, added me on Instagram after our interview, and I accepted; we had noted in the interview that we had similar ambitions and interests – for example, we are both huge fans of singer and songwriter Taylor Swift. When we interact with each other on Instagram, it is mostly in relation to commenting on the other's stories about Swift. We have not striven to speak formally to each other again or to "catch up" but being connected on a social media platform creates a feeling of familiarity and a sense of being part of the same community.

Theodora Sutton explores in her doctoral thesis the uncertainties of friendship-forming that ethnographic study can create (2020). Sharing one's real digital profiles with participants can communicate information about one's habits and hobbies which create a sense of intimacy (Driscoll & Gregg, 2010). By adding connections on LinkedIn, I knew I was inviting a level of closeness that a pseudonymous profile would not have generated. This intimacy can be useful but it can also be distracting and uncomfortable, and does not end when the project ends (Sutton, 2020). Sutton ends her account of the closeness formed during fieldwork with the knowledge that she feels conflicted about these relationships (2020, p. 76). I admit that I do not know how I will feel about these lingering connections until this project is submitted and the thesis complete. Ethnographic projects – much like friendships – are "never finished, only left" (B. Jeffrey & Troman, 2004, p. 538); what is difficult is knowing how and when to leave. The lingering connections, digital friends, and vestiges of fieldwork that remain in one's life after the project ends indicate the human impact – both positive and potentially negative – of research. There is no neat solution for this, but I include this observation to suggest to the ethnographic researcher (myself included) to carefully consider the approaches that they espouse during their project, knowing that it will likely impact them and their participants well after the official end of the thesis.

Interview Analysis

After completing the interviews, I transcribed each recording by hand in order to re-familiarise myself with the content. I did this on Microsoft Word and then uploaded each individual file to NVivo for qualitative coding (Saldana, 2012), starting with very detailed codes which then became sorted into broader themes. I then analysed the interviews. Later in this chapter, I discuss the practice of interpretive reading and literary analysis. In my first reading of my

interview data, I opted for more routine qualitative data analysis. I used narrative *data analysis*, a method which treats responses as stories, and thus involves interpreting such information as one would a narrative. Such a method is helpful because it allows one to understand better how interviewees make connections and comparisons in a sustained account) (Mishler, 1991) and is based on the concept that narrative is one of the primary ways human beings make sense of experience (Gee, 1985). I used the below analysis framework, suggested by Parcell and Baker in their work on narrative analysis (2017, p. 1072):

- Structural – what we might think of as 'Who, what, when, where and why?'
- Functional – what function does the telling of story serve for the narrator? What is the storyteller's goal?
- Thematic – what broad themes or motifs appear in this story?
- Dialogic/Performance – how does the storyteller choose to 'perform' this story? What kind of verbal and non-verbal aspects of performance are used?

Using the above framework to consider interview data was useful in that it offered structure while allowing questioning and broad concepts.

Looking back at the transcripts of each interview on Microsoft Word, I thought of each interview as a self-contained chapter of a story which I was compiling into a larger book. I then undertook a second analysis of the interviews as literary texts. This was a much less process-driven reading but is still influenced by the various methodologies that have found favour and shaped practices in the academy over the last 50 years. Elleke Boehmer writes of her approach in *Postcolonial Poetics,* describing its heuristic and cognitive influences and the way her work focuses on "attending, intensively, and in an internalized way, to the semantic processes through which meaning unfurls" (2018, p.10). Boehmer's description of reading is instructive both in the influences it draws from and also in its understanding of this practice as "a constantly unfolding processing of implications", guided by the text and how it communicates itself to the reader. Boehmer's analysis of this act is detailed without being procedure-driven, recognising that literary analysis and interpretation is a relationship between a score and its interpreter or performer (2018, p.11). The reader thus has power to inscribe meaning onto the text, and there are multiple performances possible.

In both the qualitative data analysis and the more literary approach, I also noted points which the transcript could not capture: moments where interviewees seemed unsure, or enthusiastic. I observed that the methodical approach was not easy to deploy in places where the interviewee spoke in Hindi or referenced something in another Indian language; bilingual interviewing is difficult to be formatted and captured in rigid qualitative analysis. As Louise Rolland suggests, multilingual researchers often made "invisible decisions" about language choice, and multi- or bi-lingual interviews processes have hitherto not been well understood as frameworks (Rolland, 2023). Although my thesis was not strictly multilingual from the outset, I realised that many participants were used to communicating in Hinglish, a hybrid Hindi-English language which is common as a vernacular form of communication in India (Parshad et al., 2016). Allowing Hinglish in my interviews not only permitted interviewees to speak without being interrupted, but was also an important choice that signalled interviewees could speak casually, without trying to speak formal and socially prestigious English (Chand, 2016).

Reflecting on my analyses, I see that it was useful not only for my work, but for me as a researcher, to first make sense of the large quantity of data I produced through interviewing in an orderly and systematic way. Qualitative data analysis and coding helped greatly with this process as it offered me clear starting points. However, I found that literary analysis was my preferred method of analysis in the end. While it lacks the precise structure of qualitative data analysis, it is highly nuanced, and draws attention to the way that storytelling influences everything – even the interviewees' own narrativisation of their lives and work. The two forms of analysis are not distinctly different from each other, but the process behind them was very different. Having been trained in literary analysis, it is perhaps little wonder that I found the latter more intuitive and less restrictive. I believe, however, that the researcher can use any method to analyse and interpret data that makes sense to them, and that is iterative and dynamic. Most important to this process was the ability to think deeply about each interview and to draw links between them; to see them as interlinked chapters rather than separate stories. Using both methods, rather than one, allowed me to situate myself deeply and closely in the interview data and become familiar with each participant. I am glad, too, that I chose to transcribe each interview by hand, rather than use a transcription software; the latter is often ineffective with multilingual content. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, transcribing the interviews made me feel a deep sense of gratitude and affection for each participant that shared their life, wisdom, and story with me. Hearing their voices again helped

me feel close to them and noting down their thoughts by hand felt like an act of connection with their ideas.

Case Studies

> *I felt it would be dishonest to pretend, when writing about the day before yesterday, that it was possible to see the whole picture. I showed certain blobs and slabs of the scene.*
>
> *(Rushdie, 1982)*

Here, I discuss my approach to choosing case studies for this thesis, and discuss how this relates to ideas of partial vision and "double perspective". A case study is "an empirical inquiry that:

> • *Investigates a contemporary phenomena within its real life context, especially when*
>
> • *The boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident"*
>
> *(Yin, 1994, p. 18)*

I used a case study approach for this thesis because, as Eisenhardt concludes in her influential paper on case study usage in qualitative research, "[case studies] are particularly well-suited to new research areas or research areas where existing theory seems inadequate" (1989, pp. 548–549). This was particularly relevant for my work, which involved the analysis of new platforms, and also explores the understudied area of Indian storytelling and the relationship between this creative practice and technology. Yin's work on case studies in research also indicates that case studies are particularly effective when "the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident." To this I would add that there may be *no* boundary; that context and phenomenon may be inextricably linked. It is imperative to my own work to consider storytelling as something endemic to and intertwined with Indian culture, or *cultures.*

I found using the case study approach particularly appropriate for my research because it offered an opportunity to collect data across a wide range of contexts and to triangulate this data to form an impression of the multifaceted, multimodal, and dynamic nature of digital storytelling in India. Using case studies has allowed me to capture the transitional and fast-

moving form of digital storytelling, and to explore the plurality of ways that Indian writers tell stories, rather than presenting this project as a single account of one platform, form, or method.

I also chose to communicate my work via case studies because of the sheer vastness of writing about India in any context. Here, and in many other ways across my thesis, I drew inspiration from the work of researchers such as Payal Arora and Radhika Gajjala, who ground their theory in specific case study examples of creative work in India and other countries in the Global South (Arora, 2019; Gajjala, 2013). In my work, I cover broad parts of India; its urbanised centres, its rural villages, and people and communities who occupy spaces in between these areas. No one work can encapsulate the totality of writing from and about India, but it felt important to me to write case studies which sought to partially encapsulate specific and disparate experiences. In this way, I use case studies to describe the pluralities not only of storytelling as a creative tool, but also of *India* as a place, and its varied digital experiences.

In early stages of discussing my research with others, many people would ask, "But what does digital storytelling *mean?*" Case studies proved an effective way to provide a description (Rowley, 2002) and an answer to this question without attempting to generalise too broadly about Indian culture or Indian storytelling. As a method, case studies exemplify some of the great benefits of an intimate, closer look. They represent some of what may be discovered when the researcher abandons the "whole sight" that Salman Rushdie argues no writer can have. In focusing on a phenomenon or comparison of phenomena, I was able to look *partially* at three specific digital storytelling platforms; Pratilipi, Juggernaut, and Voices of Rural India (VRI); I favoured certain "blobs and slabs", as Rushdie puts it. In doing so, I agree with Rushdie's surmisal that to suggest one writer can see "the whole picture" is a fallacy (Rushdie, 1982).

I end this thesis with a chapter that reflects on orality its role in the past, present, and future of Indian technology-facilitated storytelling. This emerged iteratively through my engagement with and immersion in digital storytelling platforms that I engaged with for 2-3 years. Having been situated in a platform-specific view of storytelling, I investigated the dynamics of specific apps and websites. However, this final chapter emerged because of a need to explore more deeply the oral mode of storytelling which my interviews and initial literature reviews indicated was a central part of Indian storytelling, though it was not specific to a single platform.

Platform analysis enabled me to delve deeply into specific sites and construct for the reader a richer study of what is happening on these platforms. Platform analysis was essential to be able to consider all three of my research questions, particularly when considering the importance of affordances and contexts in research question 3: *What affordances or contexts of these digital storytelling platforms shape storytelling by Indian users?* A platform case study, coupled with *platform walk-throughs*, allowed me to introduce these new and unfamiliar platforms to my reader, while also noting specific details of the user interface and design. In Chapter 2, I expand further on why platform studies are such a valuable base for this project.

While it is tempting to choose case studies based on metrics, i.e., the largest platforms or the biggest readerships, Jennifer Rowley notes that other factors inevitably play a role in most projects. Typically, these are accessibility, context, time, and resources (Rowley, 2002). Based on practicalities and limitations, therefore, my own initial criteria for selecting a platform were as follows:

- The platform should have a significant corpus in English; if this is not the primary language it should at least be a secondary language used within the platform
- Stories should be largely, if not only, text based. This was decided to keep this work on storytelling focused on literary stories rather than other forms of media-based narrative (e.g. films, music), primarily as my own research background is text-based
- Content should be for adults, rather than children, since digital content for children is less broad in terms of textual devices and complexity
- Stories should be fictional or folklore, i.e., not reportage, thus relying on "storytelling" – the creative telling of the story being highly relevant
- The company should have a significant digital platform/website that can be read remotely, i.e., not reliant on local print publications or in-person distribution, since I would largely be interacting with the company digitally/remotely

My original approach was to embed myself within a company, and I used different selection criteria for this process, which were largely centred around the size of the organisation and the possibility of undertaking in-person ethnography there, alongside the above stipulations. However, once this project shifted to a digital study, my focus shifted from being company-based to platform-based. This change also allowed me to use the case study approach to cover

multiple companies or contexts, rather than one situated extended ethnography. These case studies evolved from being examinations of working or creating at a digital storytelling company in India to the user experience of using an entirely digital storytelling platform. Given the important context of the pandemic, I felt this decision was not only ethically necessary, but thematically appropriate for a thesis about digital storytelling.

Based on my criteria above, I narrowed down my focus to two platforms, Pratilipi and Juggernaut, two of the largest digital publishing platforms in India which have also self-described as being *digital storytelling* hubs[5]. Both were launched across India in 2014 and both had mobile apps. Pratilipi, which is still an active mobile app, has over 20 million monthly subscribers and is furthermore available in 12 Indian languages, indicating a broad range of Indian users from different parts of the country. It is the largest digital platform for regional Indian language storytelling and publishing.

Voices of Rural India was selected with different criteria in mind. Having focused on relatively mainstream platforms in Chapter 4, with bases in two of India's largest metropolitan cities, Bangalore and Delhi, I changed tack for the second empirical chapter. I focused instead on a digital storytelling platform that emerged during and in response to the pandemic. Rather than inviting a wide range of stories from readers, VRI functions as more of a digital storytelling archive, specifically concentrating on stories in rural India. The case study approach allowed me to look closely at vastly different platforms which centred on vastly different Indias. Accordingly, I then had the opportunity to concentrate closely on a larger variety of platforms, thus adding breadth to this project.

Platform Walk-through and "Guided Reading"

As I outline in my literature review, platform studies are integral to this thesis. My work focuses on new and understudied platforms, and as such, the reader is likely to be unfamiliar with them. I thus sought to use *platform walkthroughs* to both introduce the reader to these new apps and websites, and subsequently to analyse elements of these platforms to understand how design impacted the user experience. The walkthrough method "is a way of engaging directly with an app's interface to examine its technological mechanisms and embedded

[5] At the time of writing, the Juggernaut app is no longer functional

cultural references to understand how it guides users and shapes their experiences" (Light et al., 2018, p. 882). The walkthrough method is specifically used in Chapter 5, in introducing readers to Voices of Rural India, an unfamiliar website for most. This walkthrough takes both a visual form in a sitemap and a descriptive short commentary of the website with images. I refer to this as a *guided reading* of the website, in reference to Lisa Nakamura's argument that the web is an unbounded text and requires guided readings to 'bound' its field and thus make it comprehensible for users (Nakamura, 2002). The sitemap in Chapter 4 aims to familiarise the reader with the movements and flows of the website. In creating a map of the website, I position the researcher – myself – as a tour guide through the visual sights of Voices of Rural India. User experience of platforms is almost entirely visual (Pearce et al., 2020), and the platform walkthrough as a method helped me reconstruct this, via screenshots and an emphasis on the *seen*. It also allowed me to pick through each aspect of the platform journey for users in a linear fashion. In Chapter 5, I write that the researcher conducting the walk-through acts as a tour guide for the reader. Just like a tour guide, then, I was responsible for not only looking closely, but also for teaching the reader how to do so.

Visual Analysis

In an effort to make this thesis as visually spirited as the Internet itself is, I also used visual analysis in my thesis to look at images on VRI. There are over 300 images embedded within stories on the website, along with videos. I analysed these images alongside the stories in order to create a richer portrait of the storytelling practices at work on Voices on Rural India, and to understand the discourse at work within these stories (Rose, 2012).

Visual analysis is most similar to the artistic method of close looking. Like literary criticism's *close reading,* close looking traditionally strips away context and what is known about a piece of art, relying instead on what the viewer can see. As art historian Rebecca Zorach puts it:

> *I never feel more like an art historian than when, after a student has done her share of exhaustive research, has tried to interpret an artwork in light of all the readings I have assigned, I ask her to set that all aside. "Just look," I say. I ask her to base her observations on the way the artwork resists the context we can mobilize around it.*
>
> *(2012, p. 489)*

I tried to base my initial visual analysis on this simple dictum of "just look", trying to set aside what I knew about these images, stripping them of context and placement. However, I quickly found this both reductive and unhelpful for my own work. Context, particularly in a story which contains both text and images, is inextricably linked to my work. Trying to *deliberately* base observations on the resistance of context did not feel appropriate for my work, which concentrates not only on artistic creation but on the platforms and purposes that facilitate and drive these works.

I turned instead to a mode of visual analysis more similar to "slow looking" (Tishman, 2017). Tishman's guide was useful, in that it begins first with the suggestion to "try and notice as much as [you] can, in any way that [you] can" (2017, p. 13), before offering a more concrete *scaffolding* on how to look slowly. As Tishman puts it: "Instructions tell you what to do; scaffolds support you so you can do something on your own" (2017, p. 26). Thus, there is no one way to engage in slow looking, and it as much an ethos as a guide on how to look. Slow looking not only offered suggestions on how to visually analyse and understand an image, but also highlighted many of the aspects of closeness that I have thus far advocated for in my methodology. Slow looking also necessitates unhurried, careful, and often smaller-scale analysis. Tishman's work explores the philosophical practice of giving more time to things; my work, too, offers more time, care, and focus on supposedly smaller platforms. To look slowly, then, becomes a way of giving time to things, people, and art. As Carl Honoré, an advocate of "slow living", writes: "The great benefit of slowing down is reclaiming the time and tranquility to make meaningful connections – with people, with culture, with work, with nature..." (2009, p. 277). Slowness is associated with meaning-making and the centring of people and culture. I took this as both a guide to *looking* in my own work and as a philosophical sentiment to apply to this thesis more broadly; a way of reformulating time in a disavowal of the acceleration of modern life (Wacjman, 2014).

Literary Analysis: Reading Closely

Given the impact of slow looking on my visual methodologies, it is unsurprising that this philosophy also extended to my literary analysis of texts on digital storytelling platforms in this thesis. There are currently 51 stories on Voices of Rural India, and over 6 million on Pratilipi across 12 Indian languages and numerous mediums. I read and analysed all 51 stories on VRI and sampled 20 from Pratilipi: the latter more with the purpose of informing my

questions to interviewees. As with my visual analysis, I began this process by considering close reading, which as a literary method has several antecedents and starting points (Brooks, 1947; Eliot, 1997; Ransom, 1941).

While close reading is a useful tool for a first reading and analysis of a text, I once again faced the issue of close reading as a method which traditionally sees context as unimportant (B. H. Smith, 2016). The context of place and community is particularly important to the stories discussed in Chapter 5 and attempting an analysis which purely focuses on text and language would not be fruitful. I thus used an interpretive literary approach which draws on the text itself, as Elleke Boehmer describes. This is, as she puts it, not an invasive attack, a dismantling or an unpicking, but an analysis which the text presents to the reader (2018, p.11). Noting similarities in *reading closely* and ethnographic study, I also drew from anthropologist Clifford Geertz's "thick description". As embodied in his essay "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cock Fight" (Geertz, 1972), "thick description" involves a rich description and analysis of that which is in front of the reader, but also examines social behaviour. It combines cultural analysis with a focus on text; thus, it offered an appropriate lens for my own work, which blends the anthropological with the literary. There is no formal structure to close reading; literary scholars create their own framework yet remain focused on analysing text with attention to form, language, and tone. For my analysis of stories on VRI, I prioritised engaging with the texts to understand language choices, content, and intent. I first undertook a close reading in English, engaging with the written texts, audio files and videos in that language. Later, I was able to return to the texts in Hindi and Tamil to read and listen to these alongside the English texts to consider points of difference in the readings. I wrote my analyses down as notes in the margin, or *field notes* (Rapport, 1991), before formalising them and linking them with other stories in the oeuvre.

I advocate for *reading closely*, rather than close reading, throughout this chapter because the former defines closeness as an intimate understanding of context as well as text. Closeness and slowness, as described in this chapter, are forms of resistance against a tendency for methodology to become about scale rather than "thick description" (Geertz, 1972). In rejecting fast, large methods, I also draw attention to Anna Kornbluh's Marxist repudiation of *immediacy* and her conclusion that "Mediation is not a luxury" (2024, p. 296). More than this,

I argue, mediation and slow and close looking are essential to sustain research into understudied platforms and cultures outside the West.

Limitations

Closeness comes with many benefits, but there are nevertheless limitations that close methods bring. Having chosen to study smaller platforms and use methods that prioritised discussion with participants, I am limited in particular by the small scale of this work, meaning that it is not accurate to suggest that these platforms or communities are necessarily *representative* of storytelling in India as a whole. Qualitative research does not strive for perfectly representative samples, however, and my research project is well in line with expectations of interdisciplinary qualitative work.

The re-design of this project so that it was appropriate and safe for participants in light of the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was necessary, yet it does mean aspects of situated cultural practice in India have become digital. The cost of this project becoming entirely digital has changed its structure and the platforms studied within it. It is difficult to compare this work with what could have been, in a world without the impact of COVID-19. Given the theme of this work, this is still fitting, but a fully situated ethnographic project would have offered rich detail and perspective on a hitherto understudied area, and I cannot help but slightly mourn the loss of the ethnographic work I could have undertaken. In the future, an important addition to this work will be about the closeness formed *in person* with communities and their work. As I discuss in Chapter 4, most Indians today have speedy mobile Internet access, even in rural areas. However, an in-person approach to this project could have investigated the levels and ways in which digital creativity permeates through to and interacts with analogue forms of storytelling and creative work. In-person fieldwork is a valuable and important practice that will enhance the future of this project, while necessitating new research questions and scope.

Quantitative and computational methods, including distant reading, would have offered scope for a bigger project, which might have allowed for a larger sampling and analysis of stories, from a larger range of platforms. That said, I believe that the qualitative research methods, particularly the range of *close* methods I have used, have been the most effective and rewarding tools for this particular project. I have deliberately refrained from engaging in the easy fallacy

that quantitative or mixed-methods research is "bigger and better". Rather, I have asked what we may gain from seeing closely and on a small scale into the intricate details of stories and lives.

Conclusion

> *For God's sake, open the universe a little more!*
>
> *(Rushdie, 1982)*

Throughout this chapter, and throughout this thesis, I have advocated for closeness in methodology and in seeing in multiple different ways. Along the way, I have also noted the ways in which interdisciplinary blending, while often a complex hybrid, can also offer richly interesting work. There is a great tendency for research projects to be about grander scale; bigger, faster, more. Yet scale comes at the cost of intimacy, closeness, and even care. It is tempting to undertake large-scale work that draws broad conclusions about entire swathes of the world; this is particularly true of work that is supposedly about "the Global South", while ignoring the finer cultural details that make up the patchwork of countries and communities that comprise the global majority. Conversely, I believe that for work about India to thrive, it needs to be offered the same level of qualitative detail that has historically been present in cultural studies in the West. Attempting to see closely is a radical ambition to look deeply and to attempt to describe, analyse and *care* for something as a living practice, person, or community, rather than as mere data.

In the final lines of Rushdie's essay, he quotes *The Go-Between* by L.P Hartley (1953), imagining the dog from that novel barking, "For God's Sake, open the universe a little more!" Rushdie wants to "open the universe" to writers such that they are able to write about whatever they want, however they want. I must wryly offer a converse sentiment, based on what I have written in this chapter: bring the universe a little closer, and realise what depths can be seen.

Chapter 4. Beyond the Page: Dynamics of Commercial Storytelling Platforms

Introduction

The way India reads books has changed. In a 2018 TED talk with nearly 2 million views, Indian entrepreneur Chiki Sarkar delivers a presentation to an Indian audience on this very topic. The talk focuses on her own bookish tendencies and fictional heroes, but also her obsession with her phone – to call her family, to book tickets, to order groceries. Sarkar observes that India's new cheap data options mean that Indians are more online than ever before, that the country is "exploding" with empowered digital Indians. Chiki Sarkar is the CEO and founder of Juggernaut Books, a Delhi-based publishing house. As she explains in her TED talk, she is also the person behind the Juggernaut app, a digital publishing and storytelling platform that allows Indian users to read and write stories for smartphones. Juggernaut Books launched with "sexy short stories"; a collection of short fiction written by former adult actress Sunny Leone. Chiki describes how the Juggernaut platform "redefined what a book is and how a reader behaves...[and] who an author is" (C. Sarkar, 2018).

I watched Chiki Sarkar's TED talk in 2018, and the persuasive, entrepreneurial style of her monologue led me down the road that ended in this doctoral project. Rather than advocating for what Naomi S. Baron calls the "cod liver oil approach to reading" (2021a, p. 209) – it's good for you, so do it – Sarkar seemed to be understanding of the fast-paced world that modern Indians live in; a world where one might not have time or space to pack a book, but always to check one's phone. Her talk recognises that the Indian culture of storytelling is distinctive from a culture of *reading books*, and that recognising and exploring this culture is both profitable,

but also likely to engage more potential readers and writers – as well as those who have not historically defined themselves in this way.

As this thesis explores in depth, reading, writing, and creativity have been indelibly shaped by technology. In this chapter, I closely examine how digital storytelling platforms such as Juggernaut shape reading and writing for many Indian users, and what opportunities and limitations are afforded by a new commercial digital storytelling culture.

At the time of writing this thesis, Juggernaut is no longer functional as an app, but there are other analogous platforms which offer valuable insights into the digital storytelling process. Specifically, I examine the work and user experience of Pratilipi[6], an Indian platform which offers multilingual reading and writing experiences for Indian readers. Both Pratilipi and the former Juggernaut platform bear similarities to each other; hence this study is not a *comparison* of two platforms, but rather an exploration of user experiences on these two apps. Both sites started between 2014 and 2015, with the aim of facilitating Indian writing and storytelling. While Pratilipi launched on websites with the objective of encouraging regional Indian-language content, Juggernaut began in mobile app form, and solely in English. Both companies eventually developed mobile phone apps where writers could self-publish stories, and where app users could peruse and read stories for free, or with a low-cost premium subscription. In this way, these digital publishing platforms function much like fanfiction platforms such as Wattpad or Archive of Our Own, with the major difference being that they host original content. While Juggernaut's digital platform is currently defunct, Pratilipi still runs a thriving and successful mobile app, with storytelling in 12 Indian languages and new platforms for comics and audio content, respectively.

Although these two platforms demonstrate the existence of digital storytelling in India, the influence and spoor of technology-facilitated storytelling extends beyond these two specific companies. I argue that whether or not texts are *digital* – that is, hosted on an app or website; "necessitating the use of a computer"[7] for reading (S. Murray, 2018) – India is seeing a rise in non-traditional forms of textual publication and content *influenced by technology.* While

[6] By the platform's own translation, the term Pratilipi is Sanskrit for "you become what you read".

[7] Or another device.

technology is a necessary conduit in app-based storytelling, the influence of digital storytelling is impactful beyond the medium. As I will assert in this chapter, storytelling platforms are shaping the way Indians are able to access all types of creative content, and, fundamentally, the way Indians read. Additionally, this chapter explores the impact of digital reading and writing as a form of leisure for Indians who have historically not been granted access or time to pursue such activities. Payal Arora's work *The Next Billion Users* details the ways in which Global South citizens are often denied the ability to participate in fun, pointless leisure activities (Arora, 2019), but also argues that Western institutions and researchers perceive Internet access in India as something to be used for "serious" purposes. This chapter extends Arora's work in considering some of the ways that increased smartphone and 4G access in India create new leisure opportunities for amateur readers and writers. However, as I will explore in the conclusion to this chapter, leisure activities may also turn into forms of work, as is the case for many writers who write for digital storytelling platforms.

Forms of Digital Storytelling

I choose to focus on Juggernaut Books and Pratilipi because they represent an experimental and innovative phase of tech-mediated Indian publishing and storytelling. They also offer valuable case studies into Indian innovation (Irani, 2019) and the unique idiosyncrasies of Indian readers. While there are other important players in the digital storytelling space in India – Wattpad, as mentioned, Kindle, and Amazon's self-publishing services – I localise this phenomenon to consider how an Indian company produces and tailors different service for its population, and to explore regional cultures of '*making*' (P. R. Murray & Hand, 2015). As Murray & Hand explore, cultural specificity and context helps us understand digital expression within the framework of the local environments that create it, ensuring that research about the 'Global South' is focused, inclusive, and specific. Rather than exploring dynamics of global tech firms in India, this thesis seeks to centre homegrown Indian innovation, creativity, and digital practice, thus focalising the role of Indian storytellers at every stage of this process.

In Chapter 6 of this thesis, I examine the historical roots of storytelling in India and trace these roots to their present digital iterations. In this chapter, I place Indian storytelling in a contemporary context, namely in the form of digital storytelling and e-publishing. Indian culture is saturated with religious stories, superstitions, folklore, community storytelling and more. Yet written storytelling culture has been historically more limited due in part to low

literacy rates in India. There is also limited commonality, particularly in written form, between the languages used across Indian states, with a particularly great divide between the North and the South. Regional language content thus has limited national appeal.

Maya Dodds observes that many of the inconsistencies and idiosyncrasies in Indian digital culture are the precise features which make it so difficult to describe or analyse holistically; it is a country where, she notes, digitality is marked by both "mobile phones and a frequent lack of electricity." As Dodds suggests, it is a "multimodal, multivocal, polyvocal" culture (2023, p. 19). We can go even further when considering digital storytelling, though the term may feel loose in defining some of the following phenomena. By some margin, India is the home of the most Facebook users in the world (Dixon, 2023). Nearly 40 Indian YouTube videos have more than 1 billion views apiece, with many more videos on platforms such as Instagram Reels reaching millions of Indian users (Wikipedia, 2024) Whatsapp has so many Indian users communicating with each other that it has become nearly "a way of life" (Ghaffary & Heath, 2022). Comparatively, the Indian publishing sector is miniscule compared to that of other major countries, and book culture is limited. Indians communicate with each other on a broad scale, writing, telling, sharing, and reading creative stories, but clearly, *forms* of storytelling are important. Digital storytelling culture in India cannot be distilled or represented by one industry, far less one platform. Rather than attempting to *represent* Indian storytelling in its diversity, this chapter instead provides a rich slice of the impact of technology in one particular form of storytelling, and what this suggests about the future of reading, writing and technology in India.

Technology has, of course, greatly influenced reading and writing globally. Chapter 2 of this thesis expands upon the ways in which storytelling has become digital, but here I draw attention to habits and phenomena which are particular to publishing books. The Internet has recently shaped reading and book purchase habits; notably, TikTok's 'BookTok' trend has revitalised the publishing industry, expanding upon and giving a greater platform to word-of-mouth reviews by influencers or relatable readers (Barnett, 2023; Flood, 2021). BookTok – a phenomena largely propelled by teenage girls– spotlights the work of specific authors, leading to increases in sales of mentioned works. Bookshops have responsively created 'BookTok' shelves, and TikTok has itself launched 8th Note Press, a digital publishing platform, in response to its success in generating excitement about books. Complementing BookTok's rise

is the increasing affordability – indeed, the *cheapness* – of books on Amazon. By cheapness, I mean that books purchased on Amazon are not only affordable, but also that their price undercuts that which brick-and-mortar bookshops are able to offer. By selling at, or often less than, market price, Amazon thus also contributes to the *cheapening* of books in terms of value – and thus the cheapening of authorship and publishing. As Mark McGurl argues – perhaps controversially – Amazon is, at its heart, a "literary company", built initially as an online bookseller, and still the largest single retailer of books worldwide (2021, p. 25). Certainly, as McGurl observes, Amazon has changed contemporary book history via cheap retail, Kindle's e-reader, and Kindle's e-publishing platform.

Yet McGurl's exploration of Amazon as a hub for literary vendors and readers examines a Western context of reading, writing, and buying books. As I relay later in this chapter, via an interviewee, purchasing physical books from Amazon is still prohibitively expensive for many Indian readers. Ordering books online is also slower and reliant on having space to store these books in. In a country where media piracy is rife, books need to be affordable, instantly accessible, and able to be stored digitally.

Thus, this chapter explores the digital storytelling platform, both a challenger and a complement to traditional forms of reading, as well as to social media platforms. Pratilipi, pictured here via screenshots from the company website as well as other imaged captures by me, is the primary focus for this chapter.

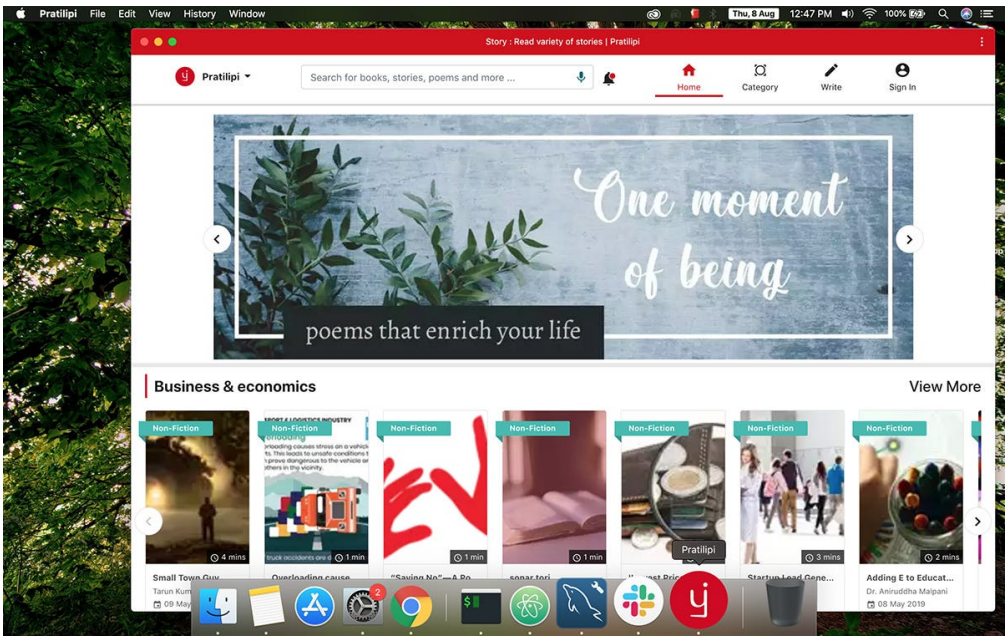

Figure 4 The Pratilipi app, which is now only functional on a smartphone as of 2024, allows readers to browse stories across a range of genres and forms

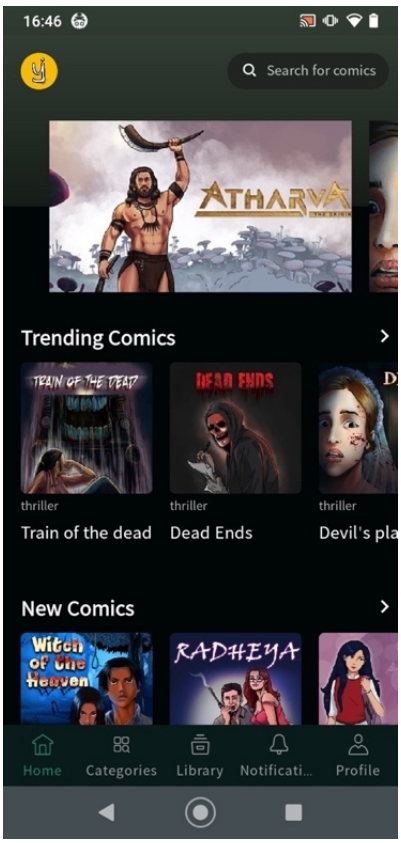

Figure 5 Users can pursue stories in comic form, alongside traditional novels or non-fiction books

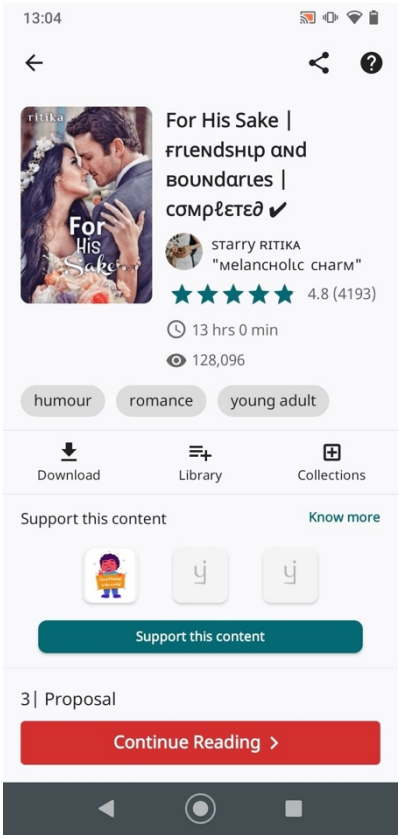

Figure 6 Stories are typically updated on a regular basis, rather than uploaded in one go, thus allowing the writer and reader to produce and consume 'bite-sized' content. Readers can also review stories

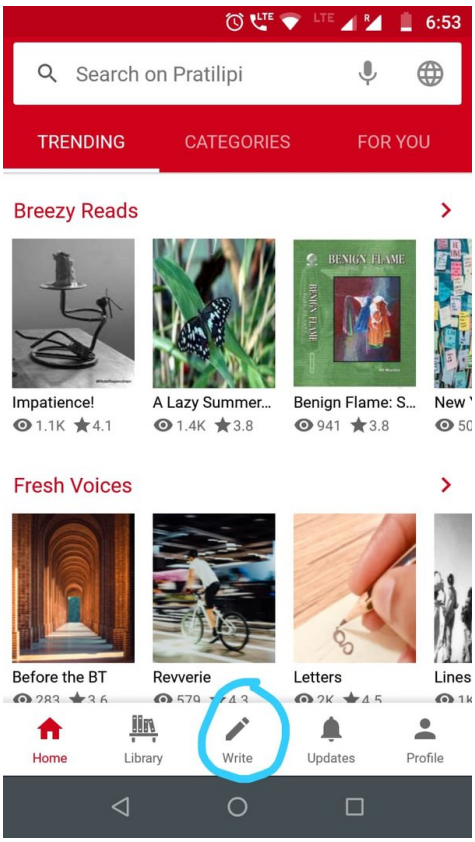

Figure 7 Like many media platforms, content is ordered algorithmically under specific categories

As some of the above screenshots show, Pratilipi is a platform with user-created stories by amateur writers. For a fee, the platform allows users access to its wide library of content, while also making it easy for writers to upload their own stories to the app. Although I have screenshotted English-language content for this chapter, the platform is accessible in twelve different Indian languages, and has stories available in each of these languages. Users can also create an individual profile to enable messaging other users and follow specific writers.

To further understand the role of digital storytelling platforms such as Pratilipi, and to understand how these platforms are important for their users, I ask the following research questions:

1. How do users of Indian digital storytelling platforms use these platforms to tell stories and communicate ideas?
2. Why do these Indian users use digital storytelling platforms?

Using ethnographic methods, I examine *how* digital platforms are being used, including how these platforms sit alongside other apps and digital tools used in the lives of users. The question of how platforms are used is answered by speaking to platform users, alongside other digital storytelling industry professionals.

The question of *why* these digital storytelling platforms seeks to explain the rise of digital storytelling across its various forms, while also examining the effect of digital storytelling on users. Both these questions are explored throughout this chapter and answered specifically in the conclusion to this thesis, considering this project as a whole.

Data

Methods

Chapter 3 of this thesis offers an extensive insight into my research design and methods used across this project. This chapter draws primarily on semi-structured hour-long interviews which were conducted online between January 2020 and January 2024. I interviewed 23 people situated in 'digital storytelling' in India across this thesis, from platform executives to publishing professionals to literary agents to self-published authors on Juggernaut's own digital publishing platform. This was an iterative, nonlinear process; my initial interviews informed my choices of later interviewees.

After seeking and receiving ethical clearance for this project, I recruited participants by directly identifying employees and executives at Juggernaut and at Pratilipi and reaching out to then. I identified these platforms as valuable sources of information because they are two key players in the digital storytelling industry. Juggernaut is both a literary publishing house and formerly a digital app; I rationalised that its employees would thus understand both sides of the storytelling process. As an Indian-born publishing house with a prominent founder and CEO in Chiki Sarkar, it sits at the locus of the literary world in Delhi. Pratilipi, on the other hand, is a born digital company. I was particularly attracted to Pratilipi because of its accessibility and size. It is available across twelve Indian languages, indicating a broad national appeal, and furthermore has over 20 million monthly users. Interviews with employees also indicated that the platform has nearly 6 million stories across its various formats. As one of the first companies to develop a storytelling app in India in 2014, Pratilipi employees could also speak

to a decade's worth of growth, change and development, which is unprecedented in the nascent digital storytelling industry.

Having identified these two platforms specifically, I reached out directly to employees who worked at these companies to better understand the processes between digital storytelling. I also spoke to storytellers and writers themselves, in order to understand how technology facilitated or impacted their creative practice. As I explore in Chapter 3, I included industry professionals at different storytelling companies in this selection for several reasons, mostly relating to the small company size of Juggernaut, but also to do with the fact that the digital storytellers rarely obey disciplinary boundaries. There was thus a great deal to be gleaned from speaking to storytellers and employees at other platforms, or those who were freelancers. Storytelling is filled with intersections of form and content, and this thesis likewise examines storytelling in oral, visual, textual, recorded, and acoustic forms. Digital storytelling practitioners, too, rarely obey disciplinary boundaries. The interviewees I spoke to were similarly fluid in their work; many people I spoke to "wore several hats" in their work and in their understanding of digital storytelling. For example, I spoke to writers of textual stories who were also expanding into podcasts and audiobooks or looking to turn their stories into films.

Using LinkedIn as a specific tool to find employees of Juggernaut and Pratilipi, I directly reached out to potential participants. The specific affordances of LinkedIn allow for targeted searches using keywords and sending messages without prior connections; it is possible to find members of a specific industry or employees of a particular country with ease. After a few successful messages and interviews, I then used snowball sampling (Noy, 2008) to find other suitable interviewees who would be willing to participate in my project. This also helped me identify interviewees who were not necessarily active on LinkedIn and provided me with an introduction to approach them.

Once I had contacted interviewees, I arranged interviews via a video platform of their choice, such as Google Meets, Teams, or Zoom. I used semi-structured narrative interviewing as an approach to this work, allowing participants to veer away from the questions I asked to tell their own personal stories – an approach that was both rich in response and highly topical for the storytellers interviewed in this thesis. I then used qualitative coding to create a codebook

for these interviews (Saldana, 2012), subsequently building a narrative out of the many stories I was told by interviewees.

This chapter uses this interview data to explore the rich world of digital storytelling platforms, as well as the environments and contexts that create and complement them.

Analysis

Context

The last decade has heralded a techno-revolution in India, signalled by the availability of cheap data mobile data and a consequent boom in media consumption. These changes provide a crucial backdrop for this thesis as a whole and this chapter in particular. Mobile data, once prohibitively expensive for all but the wealthiest in India, is now extremely affordable. This is primarily due to Indian telecommunications company Jio's launch of cut-price 4G in 2016 (Safi, 2016). The company – owned by global telecommunications giant Reliance Industries – claimed to offer the cheapest 4G services in the world and has subsequently expanded into providing the country with 5G. Large swathes of the country now have access to reliable Internet, with great upgrades in Internet speed, as well as access. This latter development plays a significant role in helping us consider not only whether Indians have access to digital platforms, but *how* they access these platforms. Fast networks have helped to facilitate the emergence of on-the-go smartphone usage and every day, constant Internet usage, as many Western users have been accustomed to for well over a decade. As Chiki Sarkar describes in her TED talk (2018), Indians now use smartphones everywhere and all the time; thus, tech devices are not only "always on, but always on us" (Bonsignore et al., 2013). Smartphones permit a constant connection, regardless of location and time. Georgiou and Leurs argue that the smartphone is a "digital archive", capable of capturing more personal aspects of daily life than other, more spatially fixed devices (Georgiou & Leurs, 2022). The smartphone revolution in India, and the subsequent emergence of a new type of digital society, help to build the foundations for the work in this thesis. Although a detailed discussion and analysis of smartphone dynamics is beyond the scope of this thesis, this chapter does tangentially consider the ways in which devices and the 'everyday' nature of technology and apps play a role in spaces that users access, and the behaviours they espouse, on a daily basis. Platform logics,

particularly the power of platforms to "make or break creators" (Burgess, 2021a, p. 23) also play a significant role in user interaction with digital storytelling apps.

Interviews and Themes

What questions need asking?

I began this analysis by considering the various themes that emerged in my interviews and moving through these themes, as is traditional in qualitative coding (Saldana, 2012). However, consideration of the responses my interviewees gave me made me consider an additional, and different, approach to this Analysis section. The aim of this chapter was to try and understand how technology facilitates (or hinders) reading, writing and storytelling practices in India. As the question *how* suggests, this question was centred around the *experience* of using technology to facilitate writing and storytelling. I sought to describe the experience of being a writer, reader, publishing professional or other digital storyteller in India today. My question implicitly confirms technology as a dominant presence in the lives of creative professionals and amateurs, with this chapter acting as an examination of the ways in which this presence is felt and utilised.

In many ways, this question was answered before thematic analysis even began. I was aware of how apps such as Juggernaut and Pratilipi facilitated smartphone publishing; I knew that the popularity of audio platforms such as Pocket and Kuku FM suggested that many people in India listen to stories on their devices, rather than purchasing books. On a personal level, the very act of arranging online interviews was an indicator of the ways technology is changing people's lives in India, and the sharing of personal stories: even a few years ago (and decidedly before the upheaval of the COVID-19 pandemic, which necessitated larger scale technology usage and availability), this would have been very difficult to arrange with India-based participants. Questions of "how" were already embedded in the research design of this project, which necessitated digital interaction, such as having and using LinkedIn, emailing, messaging, and finally, having the capacity to take an international phone call via Google Meets or WhatsApp call. In many ways, my research question ensured that *only those for whom technology is already a feature of their professional/personal life* would be able to be interviewed and would self-select as someone wanting to talk to me about this study. I had, in some ways, made headways into answering the question of "how" before the interviews had even happened.

Analysing the 'thematic diamond'

How, therefore, seemed to speak to other complementary questions. Through the interviews I conducted, I realised a theme that was emerging as a call-and-response (or rather, a statement, followed by questions and justifications). I found that many interviewee discussions were based around a concept: that people in India do not read books. I created a visualisation depicting what this common theme was, and I now will use this analysis section to interrogate each strand of what I dubbed 'the thematic diamond': a single repeated point, which splintered into three questions/points I raised, leading back to a single repeated point.

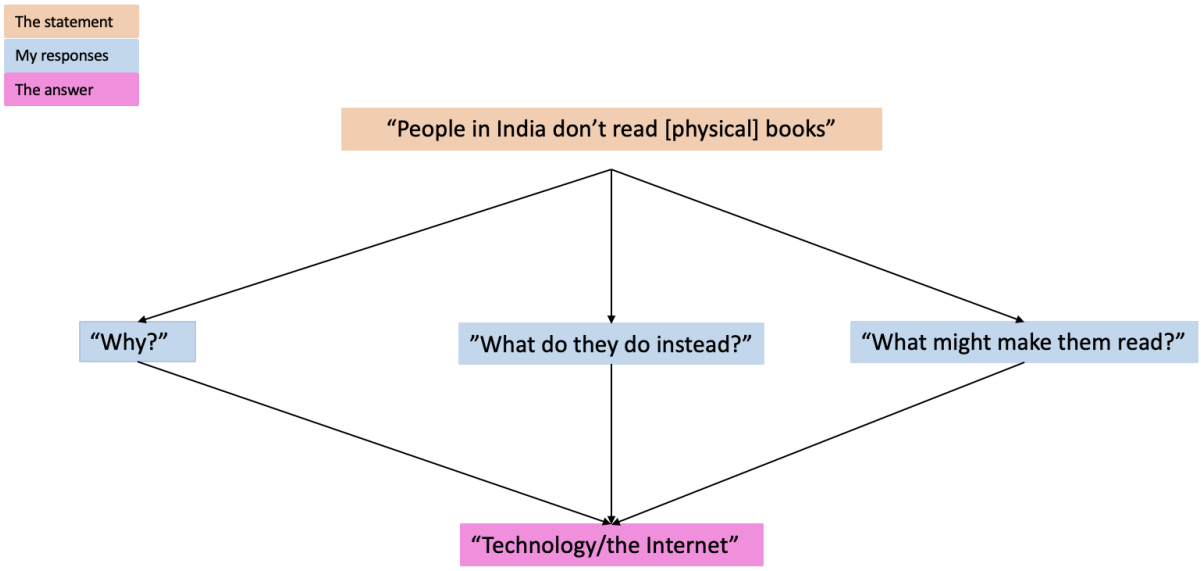

Figure 8 The thematic diamond, indicating the call-and-response that was typical during many of the interviews I undertook

The above chart shows first a statement, and one that was made at various points during many of my interviews by the interviewees. The statement was that "people in India do not read books" – broadly speaking, "books" here refers to print novels, and specifically fiction. Levels of cynicism and positivity around this statement varied depending on the interviewees' personal and professional experiences. Interviewees raised various points suggesting that, while "content consumption" (in the words of one interviewee) is popular across a range of storytelling formats, the practice of reading books is declining in popularity across Indian people.

The blue tabs, as indicated above, show my common responses to this question. I often asked "Why/What makes you think that?" or "What do they [Indian readers] do instead?" or "What

might make them read?" I tended to ask any of these questions depending on the interviewee. For example, an industry professional or someone in a senior position might have more insights into ways that Indians might be encouraged to read, or what occupies their time instead. The latter is most true for professionals working in multidisciplinary or cross-medium forms of storytelling; for example, across writing and audio storytelling platforms. I tended to start with "Why?" for those interviewees who appeared to be raising this point based on personal, rather than professional, evidence; it allowed for the sharing of more personal anecdotes. It should be noted here that a few interviewees believed that Indians do continue to read "physical" books, citing specific reasons for their opinions.

What I find most interesting about the above chart is how, despite the range of questions I asked, and the diverse range of participants I asked them of, the answer to this statement often led back to the same single point: technology (and specifically, the Internet). Perhaps even more notable: the Internet, and its associated platforms, apps and 'distractions', is seen as both the factor that leads people away from reading books, and the tool that can be leveraged to encourage people to read in different ways. Digital storytelling platforms fall into this latter concept of a reading tool, but other examples emerged during my discussions with interviews, which I will later describe and analyse.

This thematic diamond, so emergent during my interview process, presented not only *how* people in India use technology to facilitate reading, writing and creative processes, but also indicated *why.* Through an analysis of responses to my questions (the blue tabs), I determined the reasons that industry professionals and storytellers saw the Internet as being central to the practice of reading – which, after all, far predates any form of the Web. These interviewees also discussed their theories and views on why reading books was a practice that Indian society no longer made time for, and the activities that were replacing it. This section thus encapsulates both the "how" and "why" of Internet and technology-facilitated storytelling: not only the experience of using it, but *why* it is being adopted at all.

"People in India Don't Read Books"

> *"Novels in India have not taken off in any meaningful way...[I see no reason] for this to change. There are no tailwinds for it to change...We've all tried to make it work but it's fighting a losing battle. People just don't buy fiction.*

Archie, literary agent and former Juggernaut employee

"People in India like to read but there is no available channel…Matlab[8], with the coming of Internet, they stick more to phones, [especially as] bookshops have been closed down in smaller cities. You used to have 1-2 bookshops in every train station in rural India, but those are closed now."

Adnan, digital writer and editor at Pratilipi Comics

"I'm a little bit pessimistic about Indian readers…my parents don't read. I'm the first person in my entire family that's started to read. I'm a first-generation reader. I've had a very hard time [to make] my parents read."

Yasmine, publishing professional and former Juggernaut employee

The point of the diamond, one of the top recurring themes, was the idea that people in India do not tend to read novels. This sentiment was repeated by many interviewees but is somewhat belied by data outside of this interview; numbers of novels published are increasing in India (The Federation of Indian Publishers, 2022). As 'Archie', a literary agent whose work is primarily non-fiction, said: "If you look at volume numbers, every year India is selling more books; because that number is growing." And yet this number, he noted, was largely non-fiction, or perhaps children's fiction; Indian fiction for adults is a difficult market. Archie elucidated his point by remarking, "You're not going to find a Sally Rooney character emerging from here." The Irish novelist Sally Rooney, who found mainstream success with her novel, "Normal People" –and BookTok popularity with both this and her subsequent novel – represents a vision of an author who combines popularity with literary plaudits and respect. She is young, successful, a literary prize-winner, and her first novel was adapted into an extremely popular television adaptation. In short, she represents an extremely desirable figure of authorhood who is incompatible, Archie suggests, with being Indian. As I will later explore, other interviewees disagreed with this perspective, or rather suggested that the "Sally Rooney" figure in Indian literature is being necessarily replaced by the emergence of more writers creating popular fiction. What Archie bemoans here is not necessarily the loss of written books, but more specifically the loss of the author as a literary figure. Furthermore, the fact that

[8] Hindi word; English translation, "meaning".

India is "selling more books", he suggests, is not an indication of literary or personal value. Indeed, the more books that are sold, the less literary value these books have.

I selected the three quotes above from the many available because they represented three different approaches to the idea that people in India do not read books. I would typically raise the question in my interviews: "What kind of books are popular in India, and how do people read them?" The responses varied, and after reflecting on popular or unpopular genres, interviewees would typically consider the question of reading books more specifically. Archie, the first interviewee, is a man in his 40s who is the founder of a literary agency, and who has worked in the literary industry in India for many years. He has also lived abroad in the USA, working for a major multinational company. From the use of industry language – "taken off", "tailwinds" – it is clear that his understanding of this topic is based on his professional experience. When I asked if he had any hope for fiction to grow in India, he was unequivocally negative in his response. As the founder of a literary agency in India, Archie's views were based on a long history of failure and success in the Indian literary industry and, unlike many of the interviewees I spoke to, he was not immediately convinced of the idea of digital storytelling platforms. While he worked across films and television, he was less sure of Indian readers pursuing written fiction on apps such as Pratilipi, or Juggernaut.in, seeing these as experimental rather than longer-term industry trends. He also saw the closure of the Juggernaut app as being evidence of the *experimentality*, rather than the permanence, of the form.

The second quote is from Adnan, a young man in his 20s who had published his own Hindi fantasy novels online, and now works for Pratilipi, specifically in the comics department. Adnan is relatively new to digital storytelling and to English-language content and communication. He is clear that while people in India may not buy books, this is due to a lack of opportunity rather than a lack of desire. Despite his industry experience, he related experience based on a personal anecdote– that of noticing the dissolution of bookshops in smaller cities and railway stations in the north of India, where he is from. Adnan specifically referenced "the Internet" as a solution to the closure of bookshops, rather than potentially the reason *why* these bookshops may struggle to compete with digital books. His response therefore does not consider the reasons for the failure of print texts, which helps strengthen his suggestion that the Internet is a valuable replacement. Adnan's response helped me consider

the importance of availability and access in reading books in India, particularly through his personal lived experience of it.

The third quote is by a young woman, Yasmine, who is in her early 20s and relatively new to the publishing and literary industry. Though Yasmine and Adnan are not dissimilar in age, their lives are very different; Yasmine grew up in the diverse and booming metropolis of Delhi, socialises and interacts primarily in English, studied English Literature at a prominent Indian university, and had interned at several notable multinational publishing firms. In short, Yasmine is an upper middle-class Indian woman, with greater social mobility and access to cultural capital than Adnan. Her response to the question of reading is a personal one, based on her parents' reading habits, and reflects a generational division in attitudes to reading. She notes that many Indians are too caught up in "work and [religious] values" to have time for leisure activities such as reading for pleasure. Her role in "making her parents read' suggests that younger people in India may play an important role in shaping the reading habits of their parents, but also speaks to disconnects in valuations of leisure activities and reading fiction as a use of this free time.

"Bad writing"

All three of these interviewees agreed that Indians do not read books, but had vastly different rationales for these opinions, stemming from experiences in their personal and professional lives. Although these three participants are all part of the literary industry in some way, their backgrounds bear little resemblance to each other. While I did not explicitly ask interviewees their class and caste backgrounds, feeling that this was deeply sensitive information which was not explicitly relevant to my project, class nevertheless manifested itself in various ways across my interviews. All three of the above interviewees were located in different parts of the country - two in Tier 1 cities, and one in a Tier 2 city, which shaped their approaches to culture. India's tier ranking denotes a city's population size, infrastructure, urbanisation, and economic development. Tier 1 cities are its most economically developed, serving as epicentres of commerce, finance, and culture nationally. Tier 4 cities, comparatively, may be small in population size and still in early stages of economic development. While Yasmine and Archie were wholly comfortable and familiar with English, seeing it as their first language, Adnan was a Hindi speaker first and foremost, peppering his English answers with Hindi phrases. Yasmine was a young woman who lived with her parents; the other two were men who lived

independently. All these factors played a role in how interviewees defined and saw reading, leisure time, and the purchase of books.

One of the key questions that emerged during the discussions I had with my interviewees about whether Indians read books or not was: What do we mean by "reading", and what books "count" as reading? As Elaine Auyoung describes in her essay on the subject of reading, critics often use the word reading as a synonym for *interpretation*; thus, only books that are worthy of interpretation can be truly *read* (Auyoung, 2020). What we mean when we say "reading", particularly as something that constitutes a leisure activity worthy of time, is actually "deep reading" (Baron, 2021b), rather than the reading of a text or Tweet. Naomi S. Baron writes elsewhere that "Just as *text* can designate many things...so can *reading"* (2013, p. 193), particularly with the extension of reading digitally.

In Archie's usage of Sally Rooney as an example, it is clear that he thinks of reading as something which applies to literary fiction. He also noted:

> *My theory is we're still in that sort of 'how is this book going to get me a better job or make me more money....'...that sort of self-help phase. "I want a book that I can learn from", rather than one I can read as a hobby.*

Archie says this directly after stating that "people in India don't read." While self-help books and other forms of non-fiction are read, Archie argues that the market for fiction "does not exist." In a later part of the interview, he observed: "Fiction has this multifaceted problem; the reader doesn't really exist; the quality of writing doesn't really exist." Here, Archie directly indicates *quality of writing* is lacking, tying the practice of reading in with quality. This led me to believe that the suggestion of Indians not reading was less about the quantity of books, but the perceived quality. This is not a uniquely Indian problem; value judgments, or even snobbery, are existential issues in literary publishing. Books that people read and books that are seen as "good quality" may occupy two separate, discrete categories. Fanfiction, for example, is often considered a form of writing distinctive from original print fiction, and thus not a "legitimate" thing to read (Flegel & Roth, 2016). Even when fanfiction is legitimised, Fathallah argues that it is too often seen through the lens of a political movement or an act of deliberate resistance, rather than being seen as literature (Fathallah, 2017) or as a leisure activity. Fanfiction that is seen as literary means texts that adhere to the conformities of

Western scholarly literary writing. A great deal of fanfiction does not –and does not attempt to – meet these standards. Similarly, romantic fiction and other contemporary derivatives of fanfiction culture are often deliberately familiar and generic; thus, in some respects, *bad quality.* Romance fiction in this vein is often deliberately marketed towards women and functions as a coded exploration of ideal or escapist romance. It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that several interviewees told me that amongst the most popular genres of fiction in India are indeed romance fiction –particularly on digital storytelling platforms. I will return to this idea and its implications surrounding gender and digital storytelling later.

"Trashy fiction", "guilty pleasure" fiction, and "timepass"[9] fiction are all increasingly popular across various forms of media. As I will soon discuss, these forms of writing are especially popular on digital media and on the Indian storytelling platforms I studied. Yet they are rarely seen as *good books.* One publishing employee who formerly worked on the Juggernaut digital app told me, of the stories she read on there: "The stories were of...what we would say bad or low quality or sub-quality writing. The writing is low quality, so not a lot of difficult words, and easy prose." She hastened to note that this was not a value judgment, though it does speak to the low critical valuation, though high reader popularity, of "easy prose" and "bad writing". In Chapter 5, I use Hito Steyerl's "In Defence of the Poor Image" to consider "poor writing"; simple, uncomplicated and perhaps derivative (Steyerl, 2013). Here, I consider poor writing as something of value because it is so popular. Whatever else these stories have or lack, they are good books in some way *because* they contain so-called bad writing; because bad writing is easy to understand, made to be read quickly, and speaks to the masses, as Steyerl articulates.

That some of my interviewees saw bad writing as signalling a decline in reading across India consolidated the fact that the term "reading" is hardly universal in its meaning.

"Why?"/ "What Do They Do Instead?"/ "What Might Encourage People to Read Books?"

This series of questions represents my usual responses to assertions that book reading in India is declining. This section leads into and is enmeshed with the conclusion of this thematic

[9] An Indian-English term meaning "just passing the time"

diamond, related to the Internet's role in both facilitated new forms of storytelling and in leading to the decline of purchasing physical books. These three questions, asked by me, led to the emergence of different answers and considerations.

Access

As an editor at Pratilipi Literature told me, people in India do want to read, but purchasing new books on a semi-regular basis can be expensive, as well as inaccessible if one is in a small town or village, as Adnan relates:

> *If I have to buy a book on Amazon, it will cost anywhere from 200-20,000 INR. But you get access on Pratilipi from 150 INR a month*[10].

Anjali, the interviewee, also confirmed that most of Pratilipi's subscribers are based in Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities, where "people...do not have access to bookshops." Digital stories via the Pratilipi app can be accessed for free (albeit with limited access) or for the relatively affordable rate of under £2, or 150 INR, a month. For this rate, subscribers get access to hundreds of stories across languages and genres. Anjali also references Amazon here. As I write earlier in this chapter, the online retailer is often seen as both a shaper of literary history and accused of greatly undercutting the costs that physical bookshops sell books at. Despite this, Anjali's specific reference to Amazon suggests physical book prices are still not low enough for Indian consumers to consistently make purchases from the platform.

Anjali and Anand's statements about the low volume of bookshops in smaller Indian cities also indicate the importance of proximity to books. Consumers may be unwilling or unlikely to venture far to purchase books when – as Yasmine suggests – media is available that "requires less of my energy", such as, for example, using YouTube, Instagram, or a streaming service such as Netflix. One interviewee, Rosie, a single mother in her 30s who has published stories on digital platforms in India, says that "[once] people start[ed] consuming content on their phones, they don't have to go anywhere." For Rosie, who spent much of her 20s as a homemaker and mother of a young son, the ability to read on her smartphone without leaving the house was a gift. She observes that she began writing as an adult in much the same way – by sending poems on WhatsApp to her friend group, who then encouraged her to take part

[10] It is also possible to access Pratilipi for free, albeit with more limited content.

in online poetry competitions and submissions. The question of access then also relates to geographic mobility, which is especially important for those who cannot easily or freely roam the city, primarily young women, who tend to negotiate unsafe metropolitan centres in India by avoiding travel altogether (S. Roy & Bailey, 2021). While Tier 1 cities in India have greater access to cultural exposure, including more book shops and literary events, digital storytelling apps can, Rosie argued, make the question of physical access nonessential. She declared that "digital storytelling has given people [a chance to] express themselves, *no matter where they are.*" (emphasis my own). While the concept of "being anywhere" and expressing oneself from anywhere may be slightly ambitious, the ability to read and write without even needing a secondary device (such as a laptop) has made the storytelling significantly easier for people like Rosie.

Relatedly, in beginning this thesis, I had imagined that Internet access and speed would emerge as a potential stumbling block to accessible digital storytelling. So prevalent is the narrative of India as somewhere with limited digital connection – particularly in its more rural states – that I foresaw this as being a key theme of my discussions. Yet I was surprised to find that none of my interviewees spoke of this. Indeed, when I questioned publishing and digital storytelling platform employees on whether Internet access remained an issue for more remote readers or writers, all interviewees were quick to dismiss it. Only one interviewee could recall a writer who had not had access to her own smartphone, but this was a few years ago. Another editor even laughed at my question; "That's all over", he said. As unlimited data packages and cheap smartphones have become the norm in even rural parts of India, companies have been quick to make creative opportunities (such as reading and writing) digital. As noted earlier in this chapter, this is due in large part to Jio's unveiling of cheap and free 4G (now, 5G) data packages from 2016 onwards. Physical movement might be stymied by questions of safety and poor transport links in large to medium-sized cities, but movement on digital platforms is easier than ever in India. Digital access is still imperfect, but lack of Internet or the cost of data is no longer a significant reason to not partake in creative content production and consumption on storytelling platforms in India.

"Consuming Content" and Complements to Reading

Another common response that emerged to answer my question about "why" people in India do not read physical books referred to the many other ways that people entertain themselves.

The word "reading", as previously examined, means different things to different people. However, many interviewees did not use the word "reading" at all. Rather than referring to "reading" stories, employees, and executives at Juggernaut and Pratilipi often referred to "consuming content". Said one interviewee, Anjali:

> *Books are just one form of which you consume content. I don't think readership habits should be judged based on one medium available to you.*

Anjali, an editor for Pratilipi, was one of many interviewees who usually referred to readers on the Pratilipi app as "consuming content" rather than "reading". The phrase "consuming content" as opposed to "reading" suggests two different ways of interacting with books. The first assumes a passivity. Content can be anything, from a meme to a viral video to a Tweet, but 'consumption' suggests an engagement with it that is brief, not too complex, and instantly gratifying. In short, "content consumption" bears similarity to reading "trashy literature", which I have already discussed. Reading, on the other hand, implies a more active engagement with a source, and a longer-term commitment that 'consumption'.

As more and more interviewees used terms such as "content consumption" and "content" more broadly to describe the offerings on digital storytelling platforms, it became clear that these apps are complements to media offerings on big tech platforms. Rather than seeing digital storytelling platforms as an alternative or addition to literary publishing and physical books, interviewees working at and writing for these platforms saw digital stories as being more similar to media forms such as YouTube shorts, Reels, podcasts, or OTT streaming platform services. This became clear when interviewees started describing the work their platforms did, and how they considered digital storytelling. Adnan, for example, started our interview by describing Pratilipi as "YouTube for literature". He also noted that (digital stories) "are like Reels; short, people connect [with them], [they offer] glimpses of people's own life [sic]." The comparison of Pratilipi's digital stories as being more like Reels than short fiction suggests not only how ubiquitous the Instagram offering has become, but also how digital stories seek to complement existing forms of digital media content.

Ajay, a digital storytelling platform designer, compared the ease of writing on a platform to creating social media videos: "Everyone can create a YouTube video or can create an Instagram Reel...it's the same behaviour." Rather than a specific creative practice distinct from other

digital creative practices, many of my interviewees saw the platform as merely being one of many tools to tell a story. Another interviewee, Niraj, a digital storytelling fantasy writer, said to me: "if one story is great, that [sic] will be great in every format". Thus, there is no specific allegiance to one form of storytelling; storytellers simply choose whatever form best suits their current practice. Rosie, the homemaker turned writer, described her own foray into different formats of storytelling, explaining that she now has a podcast and is starting to record voiceovers of her own stories in anticipation of audiobooks. Such cross-medium forms of storytelling also reflect the ways in which smartphones users in general move between apps and platforms. Ajay described this to me:

> *[being asked why people read on their smartphones] is one of my favourite questions to answer. So…every app serves a purpose in the user's life. Let's take a 24-hour day…the 24 hours is divided into different apps. If you're going from your house to your office, maybe you'll use Spotify…then when you're at the office, you might watch YouTube videos. You take a Lyft[11], you might watch YouTube Shorts or Instagram Reels. It's not one thing taking 24 hours of your time. A Twitter user would not not use Twitter because they're looking at too many Reels.*

As Ajay neatly puts it, users of one form of digital media or social networking are not deterred from using another; rather, they are *more* likely to move between multiple apps which are all hosted by the same smartphone. Interoperability (Hodapp & Hanelt, 2022) can be an effective tool to allow for cross-posting, but it also encourages users to move between smartphone apps, rather than move from the digital device to a physical book, or a different e-reader. Ajay's comment, as well as other interviewees with Pratilipi and Juggernaut executives and employees, confirmed that digital storytelling platforms do not see themselves as competitors to either traditional publishing houses or other forms of social media, but rather – to use Ajay's analogy – another hour or two in a user's 24 day. That is, digital storytelling fits in with and is influenced by other media platforms that are available on a smartphone.

Interviewee perspectives on "consuming content" showed that one reason why digital storytelling platforms are so popular – and why physical books are perhaps declining in popularity – is because the former apps bear such a resemblance to existing media platforms.

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[11] A ride-sharing app similar to Uber

One interviewee, a UX designer, showed me a blog post he had written on Medium focusing on Pratilipi's monetisation journey. Using in-app tools and features such as "Virtual Gifting", users could bestow tokens, coins and stickers on their favourite writers and stories (Pandole, 2024). This is depicted in Figure 9.

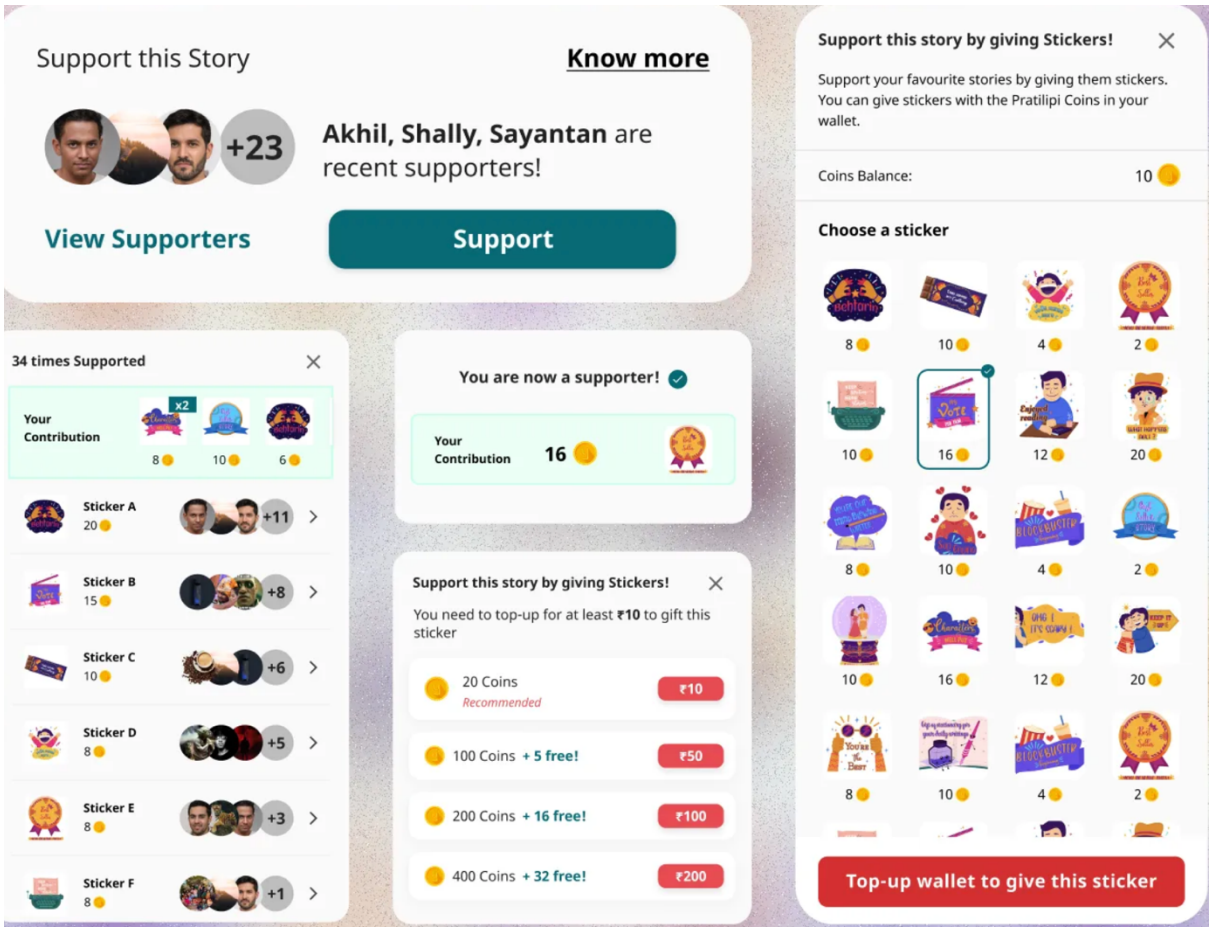

Figure 9 An image from the blog showing how Pratilipi users can pay to 'support' writers and stories visually

In creating a user experience which is highly visual, Pratilipi thus draws on the colourful, reactive elements of social media platforms, which often use emojis, stickers, likes and 'react' buttons for users to respond to content. The writer notes that allowing users to give virtual gifts to their favourite writers allows readers "a taste of the fun". The app thus delivers more than just reading: it offers a form of social networking through a gamified user experience. Users can explore, network, and interact with other users, just as they are able to on platforms such as Instagram. Several interviewees remarked that users spend "hours" on the Pratilipi app, not simply reading, but also engaging with content and some of the features I have

described. One attraction of digital storytelling platforms is that they can produce user experiences beyond that of the person-to-text engagement found in more traditional forms of reading. In this sense, Pratilipi seeks to create a community of individuals driven by a shared interest, rather than just a reading app.

Private Reading

In asking why digital storytelling platforms were so popular, nearly all interviewees cited the ubiquity of the smartphone in India today. Similar points were made about the smartphone as a device used by people across age, gender, geographical and class lines in the country. As Ajay remarked, "[one's] phone almost never leaves one's hand." However, one interviewee, Anila, who works in product design for Pratilipi, also observed that people's attachment to their phones also means that the smartphone begins to feel like a private and safe space:

> *Your mobile phone is a very private space...you can consume content on it that you cannot consume publicly. It's also the kind of cinema you watch...you can watch it on your phone, but you wouldn't watch it with people around. I think the same thing is happening with reading, especially with romantic, or borderline erotic content. This content is not easy to consume physically - you don't want people to know you're keeping that in your house.*

Anila's remarks suggested that people experience shame in reading publicly, such as when books are read on public transport or even kept in one's house. She had earlier noted that around 80% of digital storytelling users on the platform she works for are women, and many of them are homemakers or retired. Feelings of shame around reading choices are thus heavily gendered; older women, for example, might feel uncomfortable in publicly reading eroticised fiction or romantic fiction, as it is deemed inappropriate. Furthermore, as Anila notes, readers are unlikely to want to retain physical copies of these books either during or after reading them, making these books inconvenient to purchase. One of the very first stories available on Juggernaut's digital platform was a series of erotic stories by former Indian-Canadian pornographic actress, Sunny Leone. While there is certainly an element of shock value inherent in the decision to open a platform with these stories, it also speaks to the fact that reading romance and erotic fiction is a popular, yet also highly secretive practice. While younger women in urban centres of India may feel comfortable reading, writing, and talking about sex, this is not true for women in India's Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities, nor its rural residents. The ability to use one's phone for any number of activities allows the reading of such stories to feel privatised

and intimate, just as they may wish to read "trashy" or "bad" fiction covertly. Digital storytelling platforms can here perform an important role in allowing users, particularly women, to explore romantic fantasies in a way that feels private. As Arora argues, it is tempting to see citizens of the Global South as being "asexual, virtuous subjects" (2019, p. 208) without erotic or romantic impulses. It is especially true that, as leisure and sex are heavily gendered, women may be particularly unable to engage in sexual leisure activities or shamed for doing so. In this sense, digital storytelling platforms can function similarly to fanfiction websites (Fathallah, 2017). Although fanfiction is more than just romantic and erotic fiction, many readers do associate such writing –particularly queer fanfiction –as being unique to such websites. Fanfiction has long been home to romantic wish fulfilment, often specifically for women. The defiantly sexual nature[12] of a great deal of fanfiction is a disavowal of more sanitised and heteronormative media representation, even in publishing.

I deliberately write that phones *feel* like private spaces, rather than that they *are* private, because smartphone privacy is of course a much weightier and elusive goal. While privacy settings on these apps is not the focus of this chapter nor this thesis, more research needs to be done to study the data collection processes on digital storytelling platforms such as Pratilipi. Readers who feel that the platforms they use are safe and friendly spaces may be paying little attention to the data harvesting practices that platforms use. This has certainly been the case with other popular social media and entertainment apps and reflects one way that digital users may feel dependent or reliant on platforms that are not, in some ways, "safe".

"Because the Internet"

> *"I would say we have already turned cyborg...we already have a smartphone attached to our hands."*

The final point in this thematic diamond considers the role that technology plays in facilitating reading practices in India. As the above quote from an interviewee suggests, it is too late to stop the onward march of technology into every element of personal and professional life. The ebullience of nearly all my interviewees on the topic of technology – specifically their

[12] It should be noted here that Pratilipi has rules against the production of pornographic writing, although romantic writing is allowed, and is indeed extremely popular on the platform

smartphones – also indicates that it is misguided to attempt to staunch this flow. The interviewee's unintentional reference to Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1985) in the above quote demonstrates how the greater integration of technology with human life, and indeed the human *body,* is a space of great potential and even joy. Just as Haraway's dream cyborg rejects the notion of rigid limits between human, machine, and other life forms, so too does digital storytelling reject certain boundaries. My interviews showed that employees at platforms such as Pratilipi saw their app as a complement, rather than a challenge, to traditional print publishing, as well as to social media platforms such as Instagram or YouTube. Digital storytelling on Pratilipi is an amorphous blend of various entertainment features that include, but are not limited to, reading.

Many interviewees I spoke to were optimistic about the future of storytelling in India, as enabled by the Internet. Anila, editor at Pratilipi, argued:

> *This perception that technology is taking away from the traditional world...I realised that wasn't true, because technology is helping everyone. I think our first thought when we hear of new technology is to reject it and respond with fear.*

Anila explained that Pratilipi was working *with,* rather than against, traditional publishing houses*,* to expand the types of books that users could access on the app; for example, to allow users to read classic novels on Pratilipi. Indeed, as I have described above, the role of digital storytelling apps is not to stop people reading books; rather, it is to encourage new experiences of reading, writing, and sharing fiction with other users.

While accessibility is another key reason for greater usage of digital storytelling platforms, the Pratilipi app does not just house content. It is also a space for digital engagement; reviewing stories, liking posts, and participating in the "gift economy" popularised by fanfiction platforms (Coppa, 2017). Rosie, a writer of fiction herself on Pratilipi, told me how "one single good review from people just makes your day". The digital aspect of storytelling allows immediate responses from readers, personalised messages from fans, and gives readers and writers a community to bond with as they pursue a shared love of reading – or *content.* The act of storytelling and its relationship with technology is thus about more than just reading or writing on a different device, which is what Amazon's Kindle, for example, offers. Platforms such as Pratilipi offer a mediated relationship with a community, an interactive experience, while also

giving readers the space to peruse content that they might feel purchasing and displaying physically. For readers with limited access to bookshops, physical media, and friends with similar tastes in close proximity, platforms such as these can provide a level of liberation and the chance to explore tastes which are not permissible outside of digital spaces. Chiki Sarkar describes in her TED talk the potential freedoms to be had, for example, by a "gay young woman, in a relatively conservative city like Lucknow, near Delhi...Would you like lesbian love stories written in Hindi...to be read in the privacy of your phone?" (C. Sarkar, 2018) The responsiveness of readers to certain genres, specifically romance, suggest that physical spaces to express these interests are unattainable, or that societal norms make them impenetrable for all but the most privileged Indians.

Anila also described an eventual hope for Pratilipi to be an all-inclusive "IP" (intellectual property) universe, modelled on a Chinese company known as China Literature. While this latter website has limited ease of access outside China, the company profile describes its mission as below:

> *It incubates original IPs from its online literature platform, which are subsequently adapted on a range of digital entertainment mediums, including comics, animation, film, TV series, web series and games. The virtual world created by these digital offerings become an inseparable part of a user's daily life. China Literature creates and promotes IPs mainly through QQ Reading and Qidian, its leading online literature platforms, as well as New Classics Media, a renowned film and TV drama series production house in China. China Literature collaborates with Tencent, its shareholder and strategic partner, as well as other third-party partners to distribute and develop IP content and to enhance value of its IP. Many of the Company's online literature works have been successfully adapted into animation, TV series, web series, film and games, including Joy of Life, Candle in the Tomb, Soul Land, The King's Avatar and My Heroic Husband.*
>
> *(China Literature - Company Profile, n.d.)*

As the above profile indicates, China Literature is a kind of "super-app", fitting into an ecosystem with China's other major super-app, WeChat. Anila explained that Pratilipi hoped to both provide a space for writers to submit content, and then be responsible for adapting this fiction into multimedia content, such as films or television shows. Anila was open and excited about Pratilipi's goals in this direction, noting that "we are trying to help readers consume content in every format." The development of multi-format digital storytelling

experiences is distinct, however, from the development of an all-in-one platform. As China's WeChat travails indicate, super-apps are subject to an immense amount of regulatory scrutiny, and furthermore facilitate platform surveillance and exploitation if there are few other options for consumers to turn to (Heath, 2021; Ongweso Jr., 2023). While interviewees spoke of the friendly, familiar relationship they had with apps like Pratilipi, a super-app ceases to be an intimate experience, instead capitalising on scale and financial gains. Pratilipi's ambitions in this direction suggest that the *digital* in digital storytelling may eventually risk the creation of large mass media companies which may threaten that which users have previously enjoyed about these platforms.

Conclusion

As this chapter has explored in depth, digital storytelling apps allow Indian users to explore their love of reading and writing, but also their desire for community engagement and playfulness. Users might be able to explore the ability to read more personalised content, and more content that might otherwise be taboo, specifically sexualised or romantic content. Unlike books, which are a relatively public form of consumption, apps can be enjoyed privately and on-the-go. Citizens in the Global South, especially women, have typically not been seen as sexual beings in the same way as people living in the Global North (Arora, 2019, pp. 207–208). The opportunity to engage with sexual or romantic fantasies is particularly liberating for the primary user base of Pratilipi, which tends to be middle-aged women from Tier 2 or Tier 3 cities in India. The leisure opportunities that are slowly being afforded to Indian users outside of the traditional hubs of enterprise and power indicate a shift in what the digital can offer ordinary people. Snobbery about what reading constitutes or does not constitute indicate an elitist attitude toward digital platforms and the millions of Indians who use them.

While we can and should see reading, and engaging with digital storytelling platforms, as a leisure activity, there are not always clear boundaries between leisure and work. My interviewees all relied on Pratilipi, Juggernaut, or another storytelling platform for employment. They were either formally employed by these platforms or were freelance writers, submitting their work to Pratilipi or a range of other relevant apps. In the latter case, therefore, writing as a hobby had turned into a form of productivity and work. While the ability to turn a leisure activity into a financial gain speaks to some of the opportunities available through

growing digital access, it also indicates how leisure is no longer a special, distinct practice (Tadiar, 2012). The rise of productivity and "hustle culture" mean that leisure time is rarely specially demarcated and allowed to be pointless, unproductive time. As Neferti Tadiar writes: "Practices of knowledge making, intellectual work, communication, social cooperation, imagination, care...have become integrated into capitalist processes of accumulation" (2012, p. 785), such that laboured practices bleed into other forms of being. This is particularly true for working-class women, who are also typically more burdened by forms of domestic labour. This is not to argue that the economic opportunities offered by digital storytelling platforms are a negative change. Rather, a wider capitalist culture of life as productive force us to be cognisant of the fact that leisure is not protected. It also indicates that future freelance writers who publish digitally will need to be aware of platform dynamics and regulations as they rely on these apps professionally. A reliance on digital platforms to provide spaces to sell one's writing suggest the precarity of creative work, as well as the enormous power that platforms have to shape writers' lives. Whether this space is Pratilipi, Juggernaut, or a host of global alternatives, platforms can and do shape norms around pricing, access to stories, and the type of fiction available.

Reading in India is a polyvocal act, forever changed by growing digital access. While platforms can encourage this creative expression and make it easier than ever before to access Indian stories, the interaction between writers, users, and platform executives is of great significance. This dynamic is changeable, and as apps such as Pratilipi seek new avenues for enormous growth, relationships formed with this current iteration of the app may prove to be changeable and short-lived.

Chapter 5. Rural Tales and Tourist Trails: Digital Storytelling on Voices of Rural India

Introduction

> *"Nothing is less clear today than the word archive."*
>
> *(Derrida & Prenowitz, 1995)*

This chapter centres around the use of digital archives as a form of postcolonial storytelling and the preservation of communal memory in India. The digital archive – especially the born-digital archive – is a space of potential, power, and the democratisation of knowledge. The postcolonial digital archive is significant in Indian storytelling culture because it captures the present voice, redressing the imbalances of the past, and creates a record of marginalised voices for the future.

In his 1995 work *Archive Fever,* Derrida gestures to the various definitions and entanglements that the archive has with history, language, power, and literature. In this chapter, it is the postcolonial digital archive that I focus on. As Roopika Risam's work argues, such postcolonial archives offer a significant opportunity to *write back to* or *rewrite* the archive, and to fill gaps in knowledge that are the legacy of colonialism – but also of the inequalities that render some voices silent even in contemporary India. To remake the archive is to remake history, and potentially to remake the world (Risam, 2019). Yet the archive is rarely understood as a text of individual, intimate parts, and personal stories. As I explore in this chapter, the archive is a site of digital storytelling, entangled with the complex ghosts of its imperial past, as well as

promises for a postcolonial and more inclusive digitally integrated future. It is this site of potential that I explore in this chapter, via a specific archive: Voices of Rural India.

In examining the archive as a repository of cultural heritage, stories, and indigenous knowledge, I move away from the urban centre of India's commercial storytelling platforms and into its rural villages. Voices of Rural India, or VRI, is a digital archive that captures and shares stories from rural storytellers across India. I first became aware of VRI during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, in August 2020, while reading a piece about the storytelling platform in the Indian national newspaper *The Hindu.* I was drawn to the website's unique claim at being "a not-for-profit initiative that aims to revolutionize storytelling. For perhaps the first time, we bring you curated stories of rural India... in rural voices." (Voices of Rural India, 2020) During the early lockdown period, VRI sought to turn the crisis into "an opportunity" by sharing stories from remote Indian villages and communities, so that tourists might consider visiting them after the lockdown was lifted. In allowing storytellers to share stories "in their original voices"[13] – by the website's own description, the first storytelling platform to do so– and often their native language, VRI hoped to both showcase the diversity of India's tourism landscape while also improving their writing and oratory skills. in the hope that such empowerment could lead to finding communication-based jobs in the future. The motivation behind the initiative's inception was more long-lasting than simply a response to the pandemic; it was focused on storytelling as a practice which could change lives and communities. The notion of "community" here shapes the entire archive of VRI and consequently this chapter. As Mallika Virdi, one of the co-founders of the website, said to me: "the local community is the one telling the story." Rural communities are at the centre of the work on this platform – both in the texts and the labour that produces them.

In this chapter, I examine two specific sub-research questions in service of two wider thesis research questions. These specific chapter questions help me understand both the context behind Voices of Rural India, and the specific experience of the platform itself, thus contributing to the larger thesis.

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[13] A phrase employed by the website. I will return to this idea of "original voices" later.

- How do users of Indian digital storytelling platforms use these platforms to tell stories and communicate ideas? (Research Question 1)

Specific sub-question for this chapter: How do storytellers on Voices of Rural India, as well as their editors and translators, tell stories on the archive?
Because VRI clearly makes the point that its stories are co-created with storytellers, translators, editors, and volunteers, I examine this question in the specific context of community, rather than individual, storytelling. I explore the literary tools and methods used, as well as analysing dynamics of language choices, mode of telling, and thematic choices, to place an emphasis on the literary structures of these stories.

- What affordances or contexts of these digital storytelling platforms shape storytelling by Indian users? (Research Question 3)

Specific sub-question for this chapter: How does the reader/website user of rural storytelling platform Voices of Rural India co-create meaning on the website?
Using a platform walkthrough and reading of the platform map, I explore how Voices of Rural India facilitates online storytelling. I argue that the website is a text that can be navigated, and that the website user or reader of this text is fundamental to inscribing meaning on it. This concept is central to VRI's concept of "community storytelling", which has both a methodological and thematic element to it. Through this analysis, I explore the ways in which this specific storytelling platform shapes the stories it hosts, and thus consider the contexts and affordances of this platform.

The Amateur and the Archive

This work is preoccupied with the figure of the amateur, and in particular amateur storytellers. Amateur stories often reflect voices which have been historically (or contemporarily) marginalised. In focusing this thesis on Indian storytelling platforms, and looking specifically at the rural platform Voices of Rural India in this chapter, I argue for a closer consideration of amateur art. Amateur storytelling is disruptive and challenging (Bryan-Wilson & Piekut, 2020), both inspired by mass culture and yet distinctly different from it. We are living through a cultural moment that signals the "rise of the amateur": amateur writing, amateur dissemination, and amateur reading. I propose new attention be focused on the amateur in Indian storytelling, particularly in relation to digital technology. Digital storytelling is not only

a valuable tool to unearth histories, traditions, and peoples, but also has potential to make art and artmaking more accessible for ordinary Internet users.

Amateur storytelling is especially crucial in the context of communities from whom mainstream media and society rarely shines its spotlight on; in this case, rural Indians. The drive to hear from India's rural communities is one that has gained traction in recent years, yet rural issues still represent only a small percentage of media coverage in India (Barzun, 1956). With the exception of the farmer's protests of 2021-2022, where rural concerns impinged on urban citizens of India (*The Indian Farmer Protests*, 2022), rural issues and narratives are rarely considered in Indian centres of power. A notable database of rural life and data in India is The People's Archive of Rural India (PARI), a "living journal" of the countryside (People's Archive of Rural India, 2017). It reflects an alternative to Indian journalistic publications, which are largely focused on urban areas. Other smaller platforms, groups, and websites also champion rural communities, usually while funded by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and development charities. Over the course of this project, I also explored websites with a rural archive focus such as Gaon Connection, Khabar Lahariya, and Zed Tells, which champion more regional histories and tales. I selected Voices of Rural India over other rural storytelling platforms due to its emphasis on "original voices", on storytelling as a practice, and on community-building. Rather than framing rural knowledge as journalism or media reporting, VRI makes a concerted effort to allow its storytellers to speak for themselves, and to tell their stories in their own words.

The democratic hope for digital storytelling means that we are reliant, as Burgess puts it, on "ordinary voices", and "a new ethics of amateurism" (Burgess, 2006). The dichotomy of the amateur vs the professional is not one that is necessarily about talent or skill; rather, the rise of the amateur may reflect the erosion of certain monopolies or gatekeepers of knowledge (Haug, 1975). Amateurism in creativity is a major aspect of today's online platforms and networks – we can see examples of this everywhere from photography to filmmaking to, of course, online storytelling (Buckingham, 2009). Yet even in amateurism we expect a certain type of polish, an acceptable level of amateurism. There are, for example, economic geographical, and social differences between the amateur writers at Pratilipi or Juggernaut, and the amateur storytellers described in this chapter. Amateurism is a sliding scale, and while

some amateurs hope to be recognised and discovered, this is not necessarily possible or even the goal for other writers.

The search for authenticity can have the adverse effect of framing stereotypical narratives, as Lilly Irani explores in her work, with Indian designers being asked to create more "Indian"-seeming work (Irani, 2019). I argue that we can consider this specific form of amateur storytelling as the "poor image" as in Hito Steyerl's "In Defense of the Poor Image" (2009). The "poor story" is analogous to the "poor image". It is crucial to recognise here that the connotations of Steyerl's usage of the term argue for a release from art's gatekeepers, rather than poor in the sense of paucity or lack. The *poor image* is imperfect and low-resolution, "it is about defiance and appropriation just as it is about conformism and exploitation. In short: it is about reality." (Steyerl, 2013) Digital stories are common, they are imperfect, they are easily shared, they are the verbal equivalent of "low-resolution" images. Steyerl discusses the value of the visually rich image: "The rich image established its own set of hierarchies, with new technologies offering more and more possibilities to creatively degrade it." The 'rich' image is not in this sense better than the poor image but valued more greatly. The stories on the VRI archive are a type of "poor story"; free, readable, accessible, and common in many senses. They are written for the fact that these stories can be distributed widely, circulated freely, and read by anyone. Digital storytelling must be studied for its potential to offer us visions of art and literature that can be easily accessed and freely read.

The archive in this chapter is a repository of storytelling, knowledge, and worldbuilding. In digitally capturing and consolidating the stories from marginalised rural communities, the archive can function as a space of retrieval. Elizabeth Povinelli, who has worked with indigenous Australian communities to build a postcolonial digital archive for rural Australia, writes that "The postcolonial archivist is charged with finding lost objects, subjugated knowledges, and excluded socialities within existing archives...to repatriate exiled objects, knowledges, and socialities" (Povinelli, 2011). The digital archive is a space for lost things and found things, and a space where silenced colonial subjects can potentially retrieve and rewrite colonial histories. However, as this chapter explores, this optimism in the potential of the archive must be tempered with the realities of what it is that archives promote and reaffirm.

I spent months of research reading about and from Voices of Rural India, speaking to people associated with it and the rural development space, and engaging deeply with the website

design. Through my ethnography of the platform, I explored the notion of "community storytelling" in rural India: stories about communities, by communities, for the benefit of communities. This chapter explores the concept of co-creation in storytelling via digital platforms, as well as extracting and considering the major themes of tradition, tourism, and modernity in the stories themselves. I examine how the Internet's affordances, via rural storytelling platforms, turn users into writers and readers. I argue that the website itself is a text, one that invites collaboration and co-creation, and explore this via the content of the stories on VRI and the website itself. Using ethnographic methods and "thick description" to set the scene for this (Geertz, 2008), I investigate and analyse the meaning of storytelling in the setting of rural India.

What Kind of Storytelling?

On Voices of Rural India, storytelling is both a noun – an artefact, something to be preserved – and a verb, something which itself is used to preserve and capture community and rural tradition. In this chapter, it is the co-creation of stories, their shared *telling,* which is particularly significant. The involvement of various actors in making and disseminating stories centres community such that each story is a co-production between multiple people. In the case of Voices of Rural India, translators and editors are involved in honing the stories, speaking to the storytellers, and turning the 'raw' story into a written English narrative.

Community is at the forefront of VRI's content and approach to storytelling, and the preservation of this community is in many ways the raison d'etre of the website and the charitable organisations that fund it. The community here takes on a specific presence and voice, like a central character in a story. This attitude towards the collective versus the individual was reflected several times across my research process; VRI largely reflects on stories of communities and groups rather than individuals. In this chapter, I explore the various uses of rural storytelling to preserve and share culture and consider the impact of 'community storytelling' on both the platform itself and on storytelling culture.

Methods

The methods I used for this chapter prioritised a close intimacy with the platform and the stories on it. To closely consider the context and meaning of rural storytelling on Voices of Rural India, I used several methods which allowed me to gain a rich and "thick" understanding

of this field site (Geertz, 2008). Methodological interdisciplinarity has been crucial for this thesis in allowing me to use literary methods alongside qualitative sociological contexts, tools, and language. While work focusing on digital storytelling tends to be either primarily literary (Jordan, 2014, 2019; Joyce, 1992) or sociological (Burgess, 2006; Couldry, 2010; Klaebe et al., 2007) in its framing and execution, this thesis is unique in the way it marries these disciplines to build what I call a *textured reading* of this field site and context. Chapter 3, the methods chapter for this thesis, expands more on the intermingling of disciplines that form this work.

I spent over a year immersed in rural storytelling platforms and websites, namely Voices of Rural India and People's Archive of Rural India and their sister websites or accounts, such as Himalayan Ark (a travel company that is linked with Voices of Rural India) and the Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF), the primary funder of Voices of Rural India. VRI and PARI also have social media accounts which create a community and network around the storytellers and their posts: they both have Facebook pages, Twitter accounts, Instagram accounts, and YouTube channels, although posting frequency varies a great deal between the two platforms and between different social media platforms.

I spent several months "lurking" (Beaulieu, 2004) within the communities of these two initiatives helped me to get a sense of their concerns and aims, while being conscious of the limitations of this strategy (Hine, 2008) in how it prioritises public-facing content and activity. A longer-term embeddedness (over the course of a year) also created a sense of the temporal changes happening on these websites, especially in response to the global pandemic, which was an explicit reason for the creation of VRI. I used a website walkthrough to more closely observe VRI's website and to understand the visual and thematic choices behind its interface (Light et al., 2018). Using this walkthrough, I both introduce users to this relatively new and unfamiliar website while also pointing out and analysing its design. This walkthrough takes both a visual form in a sitemap, and a descriptive short commentary of the website with images. I refer to this as a *guided reading* of the website, in reference to Lisa Nakamura's argument that the web is an unbounded text and requires guided readings to 'bound' its field and thus make it comprehensible for users (Nakamura, 2002).

After building the website walkthrough, I undertook a rigorous *close reading and qualitative analysis* of all fifty-one stories on Voices of Rural India, in several detailed stages. In my initial reading, I prioritised engaging with the texts to understand language choices, content, and

intent. I first undertook a close reading in English, engaging with the written texts, audio files and videos in that language. Later, I was able to return to the texts in Hindi and Tamil to read and listen to these alongside the English texts to consider points of difference in the readings. I wrote my analyses down as notes in the margin, or field notes. I explore my methodological choices and challenges in more depth in Chapter 3, where I advocate for the close approach that frames this thesis.

The Internet makes readers and writers of us all. In my analysis of this work and the multiple readings I undertook, I moved between reading the text and writing it, by inscribing meaning into it; as Elleke Boehmer puts it, if the text is a score, the reader is "the interpreter of that score, even its performer" (Boehmer, 2018). In this chapter, I focus on how rural storytellers use the Internet to tell stories, but also in how the readers of VRI work together to create 'community storytelling'. This textured reading layers multiple methods and ways of understanding to understand the website, and the experience of reading online, in a new way.

Data and Analysis

'Platform Walkthrough': The Website as Text

A guided reading of the platform

Platform walkthroughs have been used in various aspects of digital culture to "[engage] directly with an app's interface to examine its technological mechanisms and embedded cultural references to understand how it guides users and shapes their experiences." (Light et al., 2018). They are also used by software engineers in designing and showcasing a platform (IEEE, 2008). Walkthroughs usually involve going through an app or platform step-by-step and showing the viewer hacks, shortcuts, or ways to use the app. The creator of the walkthrough can demonstrate how to use a platform most efficiently or, indeed, how to "beat" it; game reviewers may use it to suggest shortcuts. In these cases, the platform is viewed as an adversary to challenge and conquer. Yet platforms may also present themselves as friendly allies, waiting to help users and facilitate aspects of their lives; the person conducting the platform walkthrough here acts as more of a tour guide, highlighting the 'hidden gems' and sights of a website to a traveller passing by.

In providing my analysis of Voices of Rural India, I seek to be neither a tour guide nor a challenger. Instead, I argue that my exploration of the platform is closer to a "guided reading"

(Nakamura, 2002). My analysis takes the form of reading deeply into the rich detail and intricacies of the website. If the web is an unbounded text, the website is a bounded one, and, like many texts, it thus benefits from the close analysis of a guided reading. A mere walkthrough alone would not yield a rich and sensitive understanding of what the website is trying to achieve, and to examine the way it utilises tropes and familiar narratives. This method sees the website as a text to read closely and to understand. All websites and platforms try to tell a story. In this close reading, I look to make sense of what story this website is telling, and what methods it uses to do so.

The walkthrough

Figure 10 Website banner that introduces the reader/user to Voices of Rural India

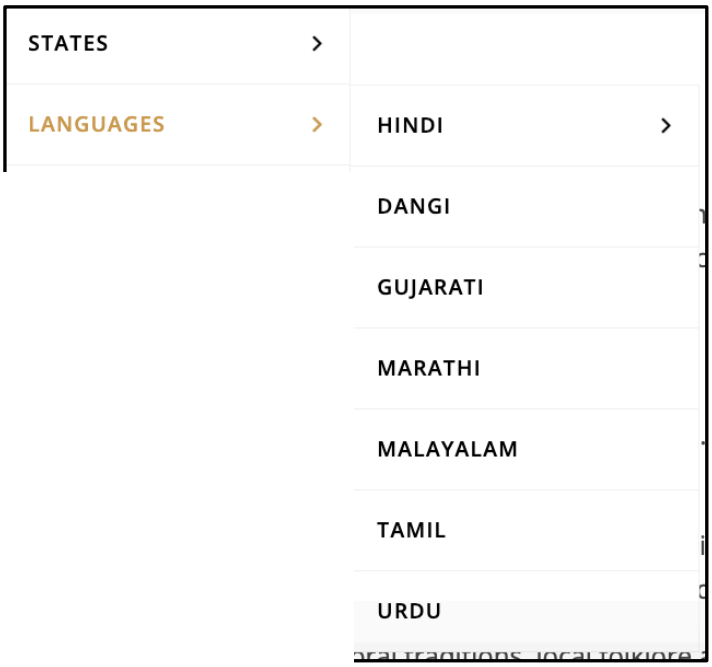

Figure 11 The language options available on VRI. Note that English is the standard for the website and is thus not an option

The reader enters the website on the main page, where they are greeted by a banner that reads 'Voices of Rural India – A curated platform for rural storytellers', which features text against a backdrop image of a lone figure on a bicycle journeying along a meadow of yellow flowers. The default language for the website is English; on the top left of the home page are four language options in four different Indian scripts. During my reading of this website, I could only identify Hindi, which is the first option on the far left, but using Google Translate I learned the other three language options (from left to right) are Gujarati, Malayalam, and Marathi.

Clicking on these language options does not change the overall content of the website, but rather refreshes the page so the reader can see which stories are present in these languages. This is not a complete list of the languages available, nor does choosing a language option bring up all the stories linked with that language. The language option is also incomplete in that it also brings up stories in translation; for example, the Malayalam option only brings up one story, and then only the English translation of it. As noted above, it is not possible to navigate the website without knowledge of English.

In the 'Stories' tab, the user can either read the stories in reverse chronological order or filter by state and language – to an extent, as shown above. While some stories are written directly in English, many indicate that they are in translation, and that the "original story" can be read in an Indian regional language.

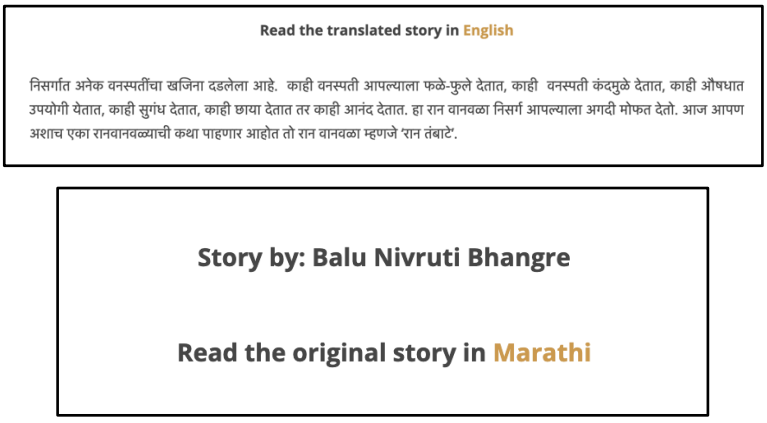

Figure 12 An example of a story featuring a link to the translation in English or the original language version - in this case, Marathi

Each story is interspersed with photographs, typically scenic images of the surrounding landscape as well as images of the phenomena being described. When people are captured in these photographs, they tend to be candid photos, with an emphasis on either natural surroundings or the activity these figures are participating in. Examples of this can be seen in Figure 13.

Picturesque view of the mountains surrounding Dharerao's village. Photo: Vitthal Asawale

Figure 13 Photos embedded in the story "Veer Dharerao – The Storm of Sahyadri"

Certain posts contain voice recordings or video snippets of the storytellers narrating sections of the stories. These are embedded in the post, so the reader decides how to navigate through them while reading the posts. For example, one could listen to the voice recordings alongside reading the text or watch the video before reading the story. Although I could not verify this across all stories (due to not speaking all Indian languages represented on the website), for the stories I was able to listen to and read[14], I noticed that the audio/video clips were not the same length as the story. They were often shorter snippets of a longer story and told in a different style. I will expand on this theme of linguistic differences in the 'Analysis' section. Each story typically ends with a short profile on the original storyteller, featuring details on their life and occupation.

[14] In English, Tamil, and Hindi.

Figure 14 A YouTube clip accompanying a text story, where the storyteller introduces the reader to the phenomena discussed in the text. This video is in English.

Figure 15 An embedded voice recording (on Soundcloud) on a different story. This recording is in Hindi.

Stories can also be accessed on the home page. The home page also features profile photos of the storytellers on VRI and offers examples of where the stories may be found in print.

Below this are three categories: *Nature and the Environment*, *Culture and Heritage*, and *Climate Change and Sustainability*. Clicking on these options takes the reader/user to stories categorised into these respective themes.

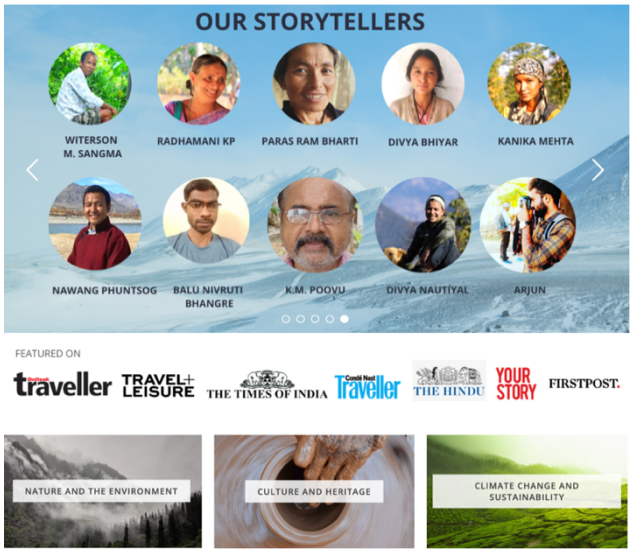

Figure 16 A screenshot from VRI's homepage, showing the themes the stories are categorised into

In the top right-hand corner of the webpage are four icons for four links to major social media or tech platforms; from left to right, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. The link to Instagram is broken, but the other three icons link to pages for Voices of Rural India on the other platforms.

Underneath the banner are seven hyperlinked tabs: HOME, ABOUT, STORIES, GET INVOLVED, CONTACT, MEDIA AND CONTRIBUTE. Of these, 'About', 'Stories', 'Get Involved' have drop down menu options. 'Stories' offers further dropdown options from its original two (this can be seen on the map).

The Home tab navigates back to the current web homepage. The 'About' section contains details about 'The Initiative' and the importance of Voices of Rural India. They detail the reasons behind the initiative, the team and how the process of finding, collecting and stories works.

In the 'About' section, Voices of Rural India describes itself as below:

The Initiative

The Covid-19 induced lockdown has brought India's tourism industry to a grinding halt. Rural communities have lost their livelihoods, supply chains have been disrupted and alternate income streams have thinned. Experts anticipate that the effect will be felt for upto a year or longer.

Voices of Rural India is an effort to turn this unprecedented crisis into an opportunity to create alternate livelihoods by upgrading digital skills in rural India, while also preserving grassroots knowledge that is slowly disappearing.

Voices of Rural India is a not-for-profit digital initiative to host curated stories by rural storytellers. Unlike most existing online platforms, the stories of rural India will be told directly in rural voices.

In the short-term, Voices of Rural India aims to create a revenue stream for affected communities through digital journalism. It will help develop digital storytelling skills using basic tools at the grassroots level, with a focus on women and the youth.

In the long run, Voices of Rural India aims to become a repository of oral traditions, local folklore and the culture of rural India, documented in local voices. The digital skills thus acquired can be used to support rural entrepreneurship ventures.

Creators who show promise in writing, photography and video can be supported for professional opportunities in the creative space.

Figure 17 "The Initiative", a description of Voices of Rural India's work

Under 'The Process', a subheading under 'The Initiative', Voices of Rural India explains its process via a graphic, depicting the way in which rural storytellers, community organisations and VRI volunteers interact with each other to write, publish, and promote stories.

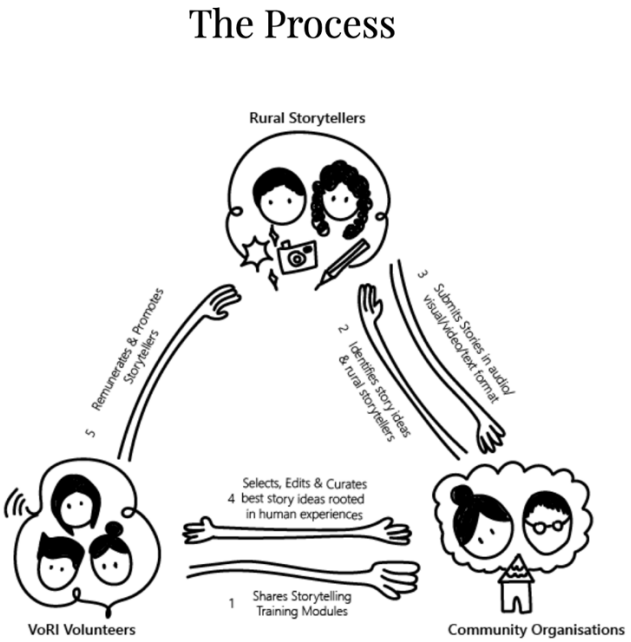

Figure 18 A graphic showing the community-creation of VRI's stories. Note the use of hands instead of arrows

The 'About' heading also has subheadings introducing the team members, the storytellers, partners, and volunteers involved in VRI.

Voices of Rural India also has numerous tabs and pages about becoming involved with the initiative, either financially or through working or volunteering for the organisation. The 'Get Involved', 'Contact' and 'Contribute' tabs allow the user/reader to find out more about working for or donating to the website. There is also a 'Media' tab which highlights the media coverage the initiative has had.

The website design of Voices of Rural India is similar to that of People's Archive of Rural India (PARI), the larger platform. In Figure 19, I include the header on PARI's website to show the similarity between it and VRI's:

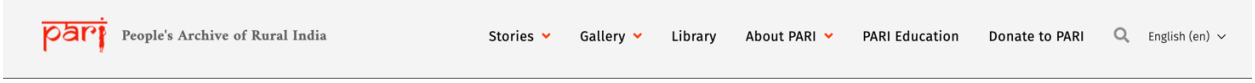

Figure 19 The header on PARI, which has nearly identical options to VRI's

The similarity between these two headers suggests an expectation of 'standard' website design and choices in building a rural storytelling platform; both websites highlight donation, the stories themselves, and the details of their own initiative. These similarities are in many ways unremarkable, as it is likely Voices of Rural India is modelled on the older website of PARI; the co-founders of the website themselves noted PARI in my discussion with them as a website doing similar work. Yet the setting and infrastructure of these websites also tell us, the readers and users, *how to read* the websites and thus the stories within. I will expand on the reading of the website in the following section.

Mapping Voices of Rural India

As VRI is a relatively new and unfamiliar website to most readers of this thesis, it was important to show my readers how the website functions and presents. In doing so, I too engaged with a deeper reading of the website. This includes drawing attentions to specific details in site design, such as the fact that the website clearly features far more content in some tabs (About, Stories, Get Involved) than the Contact, Media or Contribute tabs. It is also evident from this sitemap that the website does not have multiple nodes of connection. The primary tabs (in blue) are not connected to each other, only to the Home page; similarly, the tertiary tabs (in yellow) are discrete, rather than being connected, because the user can only choose one state or language option as a time.

As well as introducing the reader to the web design of VRI, I created a sitemap to show the navigation and flows of the website. This visual medium adds further detail to my 'textured reading' of the website. As mentioned, the sitemap indicates that different tabs on VRI are discrete and separate, rather than connected to each other. For example, one cannot travel from the 'About' section straight to 'Stories', and the Language options can only be used one at a time. Rather than a structure of flows, moving from one to another, the read experience of the VRI website is relatively linear; content is read mostly from top to bottom, and the reader/user is likely to move from left to right in using the website.

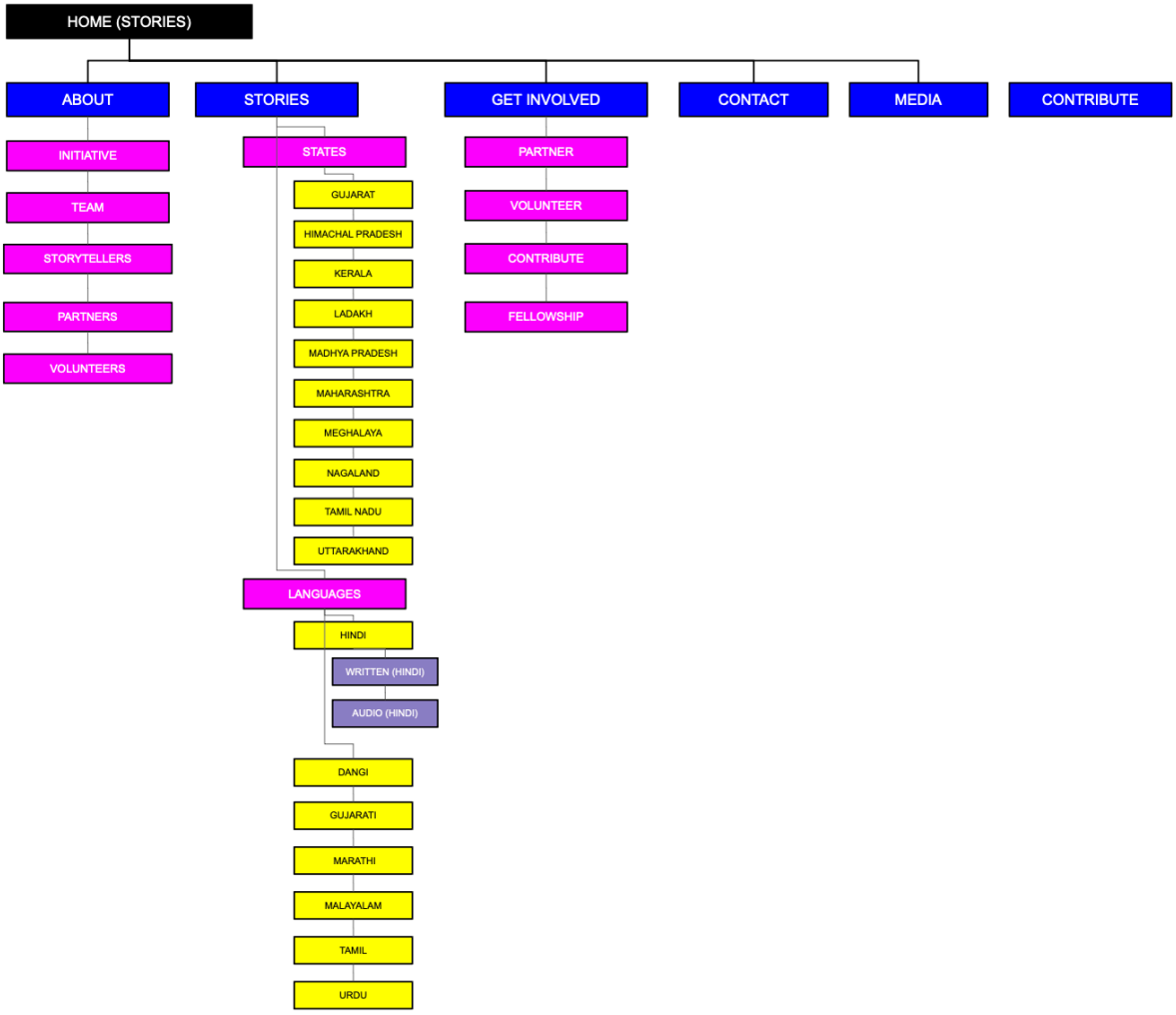

Figure 20 Sitemap of Voices of Rural India's website

Co-constructed readings of the website

The way we read a website matters. In reading or using a website, we are also writing it. In his essay about hypertext fiction, a form of early electronic fiction that could be described as "choose your own path/adventure" storytelling, hypertext pioneer Michael Joyce defines its

difference and uniqueness from print: "Print stays itself; electronic text replaces itself...with electronic text we are always painting, each screen unreasonably washing away what was and replacing it with itself." Electronic text represents movement and change, even to the point of uncertainty; content can be taken down and replaced with ease. Joyce also highlights the co-construction of meaning via electronic text:

> *Multiple fictions quite literally require collaboration by the reader of the hypertext to give meaning to the texts through her constant textual intervention and shaping, her construction of successive interpretive frameworks and her responses as a reader.*
>
> *(Joyce, 1992)*

Some of this article does represent an early euphoria and hopefulness around the Internet, and the above excerpt belies that meaning is also co-constructed in print text. However, Joyce's words point to the relationship between the online reader and the writer. When reading a website, the reader chooses where to navigate, what to read; the website can be changed at a moment's notice, and the reader, through different navigation paths, rarely has the same reading experience twice.

I argue that the website is a text, a form of hypertext storytelling that is an act of co-creation between site and user/reader, a type of participatory media (Spurgeon et al., 2009). The hypertext is a means of organising text that experiments with path-taking, via "multiple forking paths" (Becker, 1995). Howard Becker traces hypertext's ancestry in both computer programming and in the more non-linear disruptive moments of "traditional" print, such as footnoting. In building the sitemap, I argue that the choices the website user makes are akin to the choices made in reading hypertext fiction. The website is dynamic; it exists to be read, travelled, navigated through. In the sitemap, the reader makes decisions about where to go first and where to go next. The path is not scripted; the reader decides where to travel – albeit with some nudges from the platform. Not only can hypertext (or maps) not be read linearly, there often is no linear reading at all. The reader/user can leave the website and return another time, choosing a different path and thus "reading" a different text, in making different choices. On Voices of Rural India, this journeying is practical – in terms of the navigational experience of being on a website – and thematic. The stories are explicitly written to 'transport' the reader to a different place; each story contains pictures of scenic landscapes and rural locales to further

create this sense of distance. The forking paths of website navigation take the reader to different destinations across the website, and across India. The reader is a traveller, using a map and carving a unique path across the website, across stories, and across space.

Earlier, I explained the way in which the website functions as a 'readerly' or 'writerly' experience, as per Barthes' definition of texts. Here, I focus on the co-construction of meaning and interpretation. If readers define and choose the paths of the website, and thus the aspects of the website they read, then the readers become part of the constant creation and re-creation of the website. This is itself a form of community storytelling. Voices of Rural India is an initiative that focuses on the construction of stories by multiple people, and the graphic in Figure 18 indicates the way the organisation sees its own work as being constructed by multiple 'hands'. What is missing in this graphic is the impact of the reader on both interpreting the stories themselves, but also in helping to construct and read the website that hosts these stories. I argue that communal storytelling is embedded in VRI's design, and that in the co-construction of building meaning and reading meaning into stories, the reader and the storyteller both challenge ideas of ownership, and also disrupt notions of what the book "should" be. We, the users of the website, are part of the disembodied hands of the graphic in Figure 18, part of the community both telling stories and reading them. In a more literal sense, this is gestured to on VRI's website via the numerous tabs whereby users can participate in the initiative, via donation, volunteering, or other contributions. There are numerous ways to become involved in the labour of maintaining the initiative, and numerous ways to become a "part" of the community of storytellers referenced on the website.

English usage on Voices of Rural India's website

The use of English as the core language of the VRI archive indicates the power of colonial linguistic norms. There are numerous gestures to the class, caste and financial status of the imagined audience (Litt, 2012) on the website through the use of English-language content. On the VRI website, it is not possible to access and use the website without English fluency, and all the stories are available first in this language before being translated. Although it is possible to filter for stories written in Indian regional languages, it is not possible to navigate the website in another language; thus, this textured reading is limited by linguistic specificity. For some in India, the continued persistence of English in highly educated and metropolitan circles in India has its roots in "the early fabric of colonial life" (M. Roy, 1994). Yet it is

simplistic to reduce English to simply the language of colonial rule when it is spoken by millions across India in some context (S, 2019) and has taken on a life force of its own, blended and merged with other Indian regional languages in vernacular contexts (Saxena, 2022). Rather, its context in the context of VRI suggests the importance of translating Indian regional content for global users, and the fact that English is the default language of digital technologies (Zaidi & Pue, 2022) Written English in particular – rather than broken, oral "poor English" (as in the 'poor image' (Steyerl, 2013)) – is a more politicised vernacular that demands a certain literacy from its users (Saxena, 2022). In making the website accessible for English-language users, VRI signals the intended user as someone who is part of "economically and politically powerful groups in India" (Mishra, 2000) and who embodies the exact metropolitan, highly educated citizen that the storytellers of VRI are not. There is a tension in the difference between writer and reader here, especially in co-creation. The writers of VRI must be translated to be understood by many of their readers; conversely, there is no translating the English site design into Indian regional languages. The issue of language, culture and meeting marginalised writers in the margins (hooks, 1989) is one that repeatedly emerges throughout the stories on VRI.

Thematic Analysis

Stories on Voices of Rural India

Introducing the stories

In this section, I cluster my analysis of the stories on Voices on Rural India by theme. I discuss the key motifs of the stories and the concerns that occupy the storytellers in the wider archive. I will first explain the *form* of the story on VRI.

The stories on VRI are short (1500 – 2000 word[15]) anecdotes typically reflecting on a specific aspect of life in the community the storyteller is from. These elements of community history are told through the lens of personal history; storytellers often introduce themselves and their relationship with the community before discussing the specific ritual, tradition, historical event, or site that is the focus of the writing. The stories are not fictional, but they often focus on

[15] This word count does not include the word count of the work in translation or the words in the video or audio clips

superstitions or folklore in the community. All the stories on the website are interspersed with scenic photos of landscapes – usually mountains or rivers – and heritage sites where relevant. Some of the stories also include audio clips (via SoundCloud), video clips (via YouTube), or translations of the story. Such a mix of forms is impossible in print storytelling, hence the use of digital storytelling to examine the links between the story and to make features such as translation and oral storytelling more viable.

There are 51 stories on Voices in Rural India. All of these are available in English, with 34 stories available in Hindi or Tamil text (or with Hindi audio). As these are the Indian languages I speak, I read through or listened to these texts in the original language as well. I thus read all fifty-one stories for the first time in English and the available Hindi or Tamil a second time in these languages. My work between languages was less of a straightforward translation – this is undertaken by Voices of India's volunteers and translators – but rather an examination of moments of tension and ineffability across the texts and their translated counterparts.

I then read through the texts again to note paratextual features of the stories, such as the use of voice notes, videos, and photographs. The voice clips also featured background noise, which helped build a sense of living place and allowed me to better understand tone in the storytelling. Upon reading the texts again, I considered all these elements together. Reading the texts in this way challenged my notions of how to read linearly (if such a reading is even possible in digital storytelling); each reading required different ways of thinking, reading, and understanding, a movement between languages and modes.

Finally, I also conducted two interviews (and several email discussions) with Mallika Virdi, one of the primary founders of the platforms. Aside from being one of the central nodes of VRI, Mallika also lives in Munsiyari, the village where the concept for the website originated. She offered an understanding and personal context to this work, which was invaluable, as well as providing more insight into the motivation behind the initiative. I include and analyse some of Mallika's comments in this chapter because her voice and responses added to my *textured reading* of this website, as well as clarifying some points of uncertainty I had when I began my work.

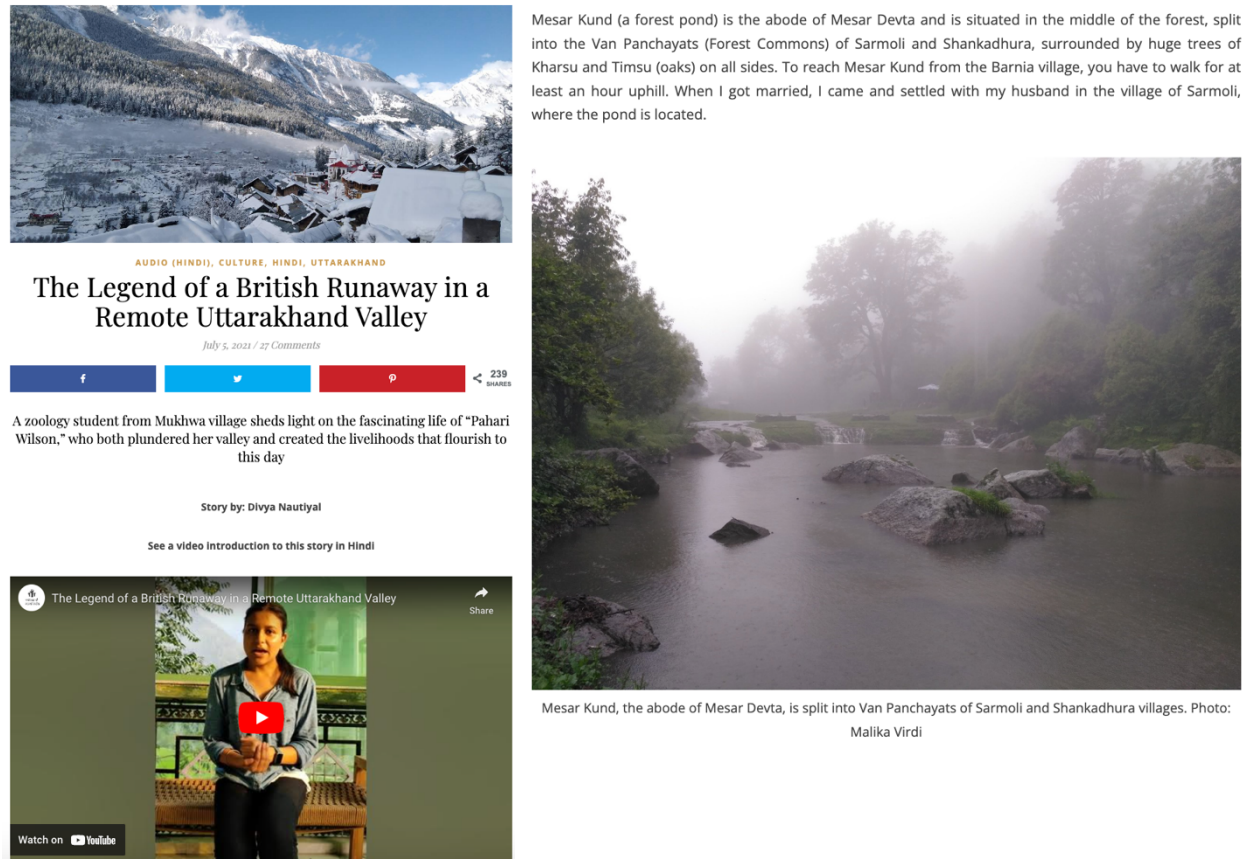

Figure 21 An example of two stories on Voices of Rural India's website, showcasing the use of photos, video inserts, and the style of language used.

Here I note that while many of the stories are in translation, the translator or editor of the story is themselves a key part of the storytelling process, and their semantic decision-making is thus important to explore and comment on. Each story thus has multiple collaborators, as expressed in previous sections, and the language choices and performance of these stories by these multiple tellers (be they editor, translator, or narrator) is significant. Though it is the original storyteller who shares their memories, the contributions of these multiple tellers is important labour in producing and maintaining the archive. In some instances, I have only been able to read and analyse the English text, but for reasons discussed above, this still provides a useful understanding of the storyteller's intent and the shaping of the archive as a whole.

In reading the stories on VRI, engaging with the website design, and participating in the platform, I as the reader became immersed in the different worlds that are portrayed and depicted in the stories. The text, audio, videos, and photographs all created an immersive

experience in the world of the story – a form of tourism in itself. Just as the reader uses the navigation of the website to travel across the site, so too is this tourism reflected in the individual stories on the website.

Many of the stories on VRI tell of old traditions, folklore, superstitions, and histories which are precious and unique to their communities. As I will discuss in my section on *Themes,* many of these traditions and experiences are not accessible even to all members of the communities they are borne of – women, for example, are often detailed as being excluded from some of these rituals. Indeed, many of the practices recounted in the stories are considered sacred because of their exclusive nature. Yet through the stories on the website, these sacred spaces and rituals are shared with tourists of all backgrounds and identities. The tourist is sometimes afforded access to a space that even community members are not, whether the tourist is "deserving" of such access or not. The tourist's ability to enter and leave spaces, or to have access to certain types of knowledge, is prioritised more highly than the ability of all members of the community to do the same.

The immortalisation of these traditions and stories via digitisation is one of VRI's goals. The preservation of these memories serves an important purpose for the communities themselves and, as I will explore in the *Themes* section, tourism plays a vital role in providing jobs for members of these communities. There is a tension at work between the preservation of the rural community and the tourism industry. While tourism can be remodelled into something sustainable and environmentally friendly, its history and present in India is also heavily compatible with "imperial nostalgia" (Rosaldo, 1989), a desire to conquer and tame the wilderness. The rural is presented as being unspoiled and free from modern affordances. Travelling via the VRI archive is a form of escapism – a desire to enter a simpler and less advanced India.

As I have argued, reading the archive itself is a form of digital travel. Lisa Nakamura discusses the relationship between the Internet and travel in her essay on cybernetic tourism via a consideration of the early Microsoft slogan, "Where do you want to go today?" (Nakamura, 2002) Nakamura considers how the early Internet promised both an erasure of difference – specifically of the 'inconvenience' of factors such as race, age, and gender – and the ability to go anywhere at all with technology. Yet if technology erases all difference, she questions, what

is the point in going anywhere at all? Nakamura specifically questions the homogenising impact of Internet tourism, but this concern also applies to Voices of Rural India's stories.

As well as wealthy Western tourists looking for adventure, VRI also aims to draw in domestic tourists from India. This domestic travel is different to the Western tourist seeking the exotic or the 'other'. The domestic tourist is in search of some sense of "who they are and where they come from" (Palmer, 1999) in heritage sites. Heritage tourism thus takes on the role of telling narratives about the nation's past to domestic tourists in search of a meaningful history. In promoting lifestyles that are seemingly simpler, "better, more fulfilling and community driven" (Palmer, 1999), the heritage tourism industry promotes a type of nationalist storytelling via glances at a nation's past (Bandyopadhyay et al., 2008). In the case of the communities of VRI, this look into the past is twofold. It involves both a look into historic sites of significance for the communities, as well as a more metaphorical "step backwards" in time to places and peoples seemingly living against and pre-modernity. As Doreen Massey argues, this places denies less industrialised communities and their diverse histories and geographies 'behind' on a single timeline of world history (Massey, 2005); difference is conceived of as distance, as being further behind or ahead. It argues for a "single story" of the world, one type of modernity and mode of being. Heritage tourism encourages this nostalgia and the supposed simplicity of the past. It asks the tourist to consider a great and glorious history (Bandyopadhyay et al., 2008), while disengaging with the reality of whether such a past ever existed for all people.

Though VRI theoretically encourages the multiplicity of narrative voice that Massey argues can promote coevalness (Fabian, 2002; Massey, 2005), the reality of this diversity of voice is more complex. The narratives on VRI take similar forms and dwell on similar topics. Their editing by a specific and fixed group of volunteers means that there is an evident homogeneity in form and theme across most of the tales. Furthermore, the motivation of storytelling to encourage tourism means a promotion of some of the values I have discussed above. In this section, I explore the individual stories on the archive, yet note that the website is meant to be read as a coherent whole. Just as the storytellers tell the story of their community – and not of themselves – so too does the archive aim to build a cohesive impression of rurality in India.

Themes

Tradition and its preservation

> *" I try to narrate this story over and over again to as many people as possible with a hope that it will keep Dharya alive. I hope that through this story, the people of the village feel proud that such a storm existed amongst them."*

The dominant theme across the sampled texts is that of tradition. I split this theme into two sub themes in my research: the fear of losing tradition, and tradition versus modernity. These are related but slightly different sub-themes, connected by the motif of tradition as something to be protected from the forces that work against it, such as youth, time and modernity. The preservation of local traditions, folklores, histories and memories is one of the primary goals of VRI, but this thematic trope focuses explicitly on textual and performative references to these traditions within the stories. As Farah Aboubakr expresses in her work on storytelling as memory in the Palestinian context, this nostalgia for the past represents both a longing for the past, but also a buffer against forgetfulness (Aboubakr, 2019). In the case of Palestine, Aboubakr argues that this nostalgia is borne out of a desire to solve the rupture of its traumatic past and present. In the case of the rural communities represented on VRI, the rupture is often colonialism and subsequently, the advent of modernity. Nostalgia is more than just emotional sentimentality; it is a response to threats to continued identity (Davis, 1979). The nostalgia evident in this theme of preserving traditions is driven specifically by the fear of change, loss, and the encroachment of certain types of modernity. Furthermore, nostalgia has a carefully cultivated purpose on Voices of Rural India. As David Lowenthal wryly suggests, the trade in nostalgia is encouraged by those whose industries benefit from it: "If the past is a foreign country, nostalgia has made it 'the foreign country with the healthiest tourist trade of all.'" (Lowenthal, 1985) It is this healthy tourist trade that VRI seeks, via curated nostalgia.

Fears of losing traditions

The first *sub-theme* I focus on is the fear of losing tradition. While many of the stories speak positively of folklore, traditions and rituals in their lives, this positivity is often tempered by expressions of concern that these traditions will be lost. Stories tend to reference the idea that the world is moving away from these rituals and that young people do not value the traditional ways of doing things. This concern drives a desire to tell and retell certain stories, as the opening quote to this section embodies; the writer references telling this story ("Veer Dharerao

– The Storm of Sahyadri") "over and over again", such that the story of the tradition will become embedded in community memory. This story focuses on an Adivasi[16] man who stands up against British colonialism in his local area. The storyteller, Mahadu Chindhu Kondar, concludes his story by writing: "Like thousands of stories, this revolutionary's tale has disappeared from recorded history." The purpose of the story is to serve as a counter to 'recorded' history, which is referenced here as being an incomplete archive of community memory. In contrast, his own repetition of the story "over and over again" serves as an indicator of both the labour of storytelling, and his desperation to hold onto this folk tale. Kondar's sentiment neatly encapsulates the telling of a story *and its transmission* as being central to the story becoming a part of community and recorded history. It is the repeated telling of the story that sustains it; in this moment, the act of speaking is inextricable from the finished story in its importance. In the sentence "I try to narrate this story over and over again to as many people as possible with a hope that it will keep Dharya alive", Kondar reflects on the importance of audiences and listeners in keeping a story, and thus its subject, "alive". Yet in the use of the words "try" and "hope", the reader recognises that this is a difficult task; the narrator even expresses that "It is sad that many amongst our own community are not aware of Veer Dharerao." Kondar's words represent an act of remembering and thus reclaiming the past, but the story does not end with confirmation that the past has been remembered or celebrated. Rather, it ends with the deferral of that possibility: "I hope that through this story, the people of the village feel proud that such a storm existed amongst them." The repeated word "hope" represents the tentativeness of this reality; the people of the village are not yet proud, but *hopefully* will be. The story thus ends with this uncertainty that the history will be shared among the community.

Many stories in the archive similarly end with a "hope" that the story will live on, and the traditions within it will continue. In the story "Morung: A Fading Institution That Was Once The Only Source of Education in Nagaland" (henceforth, "Morung"), the storyteller describes the titular Morung, a community centre that used to be the meeting place for all in the local area. The storyteller writes and describes his desire to capture the institution:

[16] Indigenous.

> *I am trained as a teacher, and I am determined to educate students about our rich heritage. My dream is to convert my village into a major tourist hub where we can showcase our local history and generate employment locally. I try my best to spread awareness about our culture because it keeps us connected to our roots and helps us attract tourists.*

The writer invokes his role as a teacher in sharing these traditions, thus bolstering his own credentials by referring to his professional background. Like the teller of the previous story, he is "determined" to tell the story. Once again, the story ends with hope and the future deferral of the story becoming canonical in the community: "I am hopeful that people from our own tribe as well as others will come forward to protect the saga of the brave Konyak Nagas." The storyteller, B John Khangnyu, believes that "talking and sharing" is the best way to keep the institution alive, reflecting the necessity of language to capture, share and store memory. This story also features a video clip of the storyteller introducing the Morung, thus further highlighting its centrality as a site in the story.

Figure 22 A video of the storyteller explaining the Morung is embedded in the story. This video is narrated in English.

As indicated by the word "alive" here, the institution is also treated as a living thing, as much as a part of the natural world as the other phenomena described in the stories on VRI; this word was also used by Mahadu Chindhu Kondar in his story. Tradition is given a living, breathing soul, and the sharing of these traditions is what sustains them. In watching the

video, the reader/listener also hears the noises of infants and animals in the background, which further creates the impression of vitality and new life. This contributes to the sense of the Morung as a lively institution which is designed to be used, cared for and populated by the community.

Yet while traditions are being "determinedly" tended to by the storytellers, they also express concern that folklore and histories are being forgotten regardless. In the same story, "Morung", the narrator expresses sadness that the titular Morung is no longer being used in the community: "Boys still go to Morung time but they spend far less time there. Young Naga men are now moving to larger towns and cities in pursuit of education and employment, so they don't always retain a connection with Morung." The physical move towards large towns and cities is described as severing the emotional and social bond with the Morung. Urban centres are seen as being a direct threat to traditional spaces and practices, such as the Morung. Khangnyu's sentiment is interesting here, because it appears to position the pursuit of "education and employment" as desires that are incompatible with the life of the community, and actively detrimental towards the survival of the Morung. The presumably highly educated, elite reader is likely to be confused and even sceptical as to the idea that education and employment are mutually exclusive with the preservation of certain traditions. The narrator's words also appear to blame young people for their priorities, noting that it is "young men" and "boys" who are not upholding their role as gatekeepers of traditions. This concern around young people not preserving the rituals of their communities emerges in several stories as a common trope. In "From Nomadic Roots to Social Entrepreneurship" (henceforth, "Nomadic Roots"), the storyteller refers to "the lack of awareness in the younger generation" about wild plants. In "How One Man's Conviction Put Jibhi Valley on the World Tourism Map" ("Conviction") shares his grievances and fears about his community:

With rapid tourism growth, other things have changed rapidly in the region too. Villages have turned into towns with many concrete buildings. Local businesses and tourists[17] are putting a

[17] The inclusion of tourists in this list of negative influences is particularly intriguing, given the focus of VRI on the necessity of tourism to bolster rural communities. This is discussed again later in this chapter.

burden on nature. I think that the younger generation needs to understand that it is possible to succeed without harming nature.

In this paragraph, the storyteller, Bhagwan Singh Rana, explicitly describes the way that "concrete buildings" are taking over spaces that previously held villages, and the "burden" these urban constructions have on nature. Rana's last line here seems to directly blame the "younger generation" for these changes, despite the fact that there is not a clear link between urban development and young people's "success". Indeed, from an outsider's perspective, the rapid changes in the region are not necessarily negative, much like the references to "education and employment" in the previous story. As the reader, I felt the sentiment of the storytellers' words, yet I wondered, too, if the fear of losing these histories and stories was indeed the fault of the "younger generation". As storytellers referred dismissively to the desires of "young people", I questioned why these anxieties were reflexively blamed on the young. There is clearly a sense of nostalgia for a "simpler" past in the sentiments of many of the storytellers, and a desire to reclaim this past by speaking about it (Aboubakr, 2019). Furthermore, this type of "curated nostalgia" – as I describe it earlier in this section – is necessary in drawing in urban tourists looking for experiences different to their daily lives. The eschewal of modernity and newness extends to a criticism of "young people", who are portrayed as the flagbearers of a certain urban modernity and disavowal of traditional values. Yet this anxiety about perpetuating memories and stories is complex, because it relies on the enthusiasm of young people in telling stories and taking on the labour of storytelling as described earlier in this section; a variant of the "phatic labour" proposed by Julia Elyachar (Elyachar, 2010). The concern echoed in several stories is thus not merely the fear that the tradition being discussed will lapse, but also that the "young generation" will not play their role in keeping these rituals alive.

The fear of traditions being eroded is triggered by nostalgia, which attempts to moor the subject in a past that is certain, compared to the uncertainty of the future, which is filled with foreboding (Davis, 1979). Nostalgia in these stories has two meanings. First, there is the past as personal and individual; a longing for one's childhood or younger days, a specific personal history; "my" past or "your" past. Then there is a public or communal nostalgia for the past. Here I mean "the past" as a carefully co-constructed entity; "the past" refers to a nation's past, or a community's past. This is the past most often explored in VRI. Though the stories are presented as being by individuals, with the use of individual pronouns, these personal

experiences are simply lenses to explore the wider community histories. They dwell on community artefacts and sites, communal traditions and rituals, and communal fears. The concerns and nostalgia they present are thus shown as being on behalf of the entire community. In a later section, I will discuss the challenges of "community" versus the individual in the storytelling practices on VRI.

Traditions vs modernity

A related but distinct sub-theme in the 'Traditions' theme is the concept of traditional living as being better than "modern life". I use this phrase to encapsulate a number of different aspects of modernity which are mentioned in the stories on VRI. In "The Himalayan Superfoods of Yore" ("Himalayan Superfoods"), the storytellers say of young people: "Their lives might seem easier, but they'll never get to taste a *jo* kheer[18], experience the joy of *gud sharbat*[19] with amaranth roti or realize the value of the common salt. Those were joys we can only savor in our memory now." In this story, the youths of the elderly storytellers are seen as being complicated and challenging; they describe walking "over 100 kilometres" to get salt and eating only what could be grown: "life wasn't easy then". Yet despite these challenges, they express sorrow for young people who cannot taste the lost foods of their past. Memory, which is the only place the lost foods can be "savoured" has transformed the ordinary into the mystical, food that is forever out of reach for both the younger generation and the storytellers too. Nostalgia has made the past and its artefacts seductive (Scanlan, 2004). Earlier, I noted the use of the future tense in ending many stories in VRI, which conclude with a "hope" or a "wish" for what will happen to the communities and their traditions. I argue here that the sense of nostalgia and longing for the past is particularly prominent in these stories because the past is concrete and definitive, whereas the future in these communities seems unfamiliar and potentially even uncertain. As the storyteller of "Conviction" writes, "other things have changed rapidly in the region too. Villages have turned into towns with many concrete buildings." In the midst of a changing landscape and rapidly dissolving community life, storytellers on VRI seek the familiar and the fixed in the past tense. Traditional methods and rituals are valorised, as in "The Disappearing Craft of "Likhai" (Wood Carving") ("Likhai"), where the narrator

[18] Flavoured milk with nuts and spices.

[19] Cold drink flavoured with jaggery.

bemoans that: "The fine work on *Likhai* and walnut wood carvings requires an investment in time. But today, people who build new homes are not willing to pay the artisans the right amount for their skill and craft." Once again, it is "newness" and modernity via "modern homes" that are to blame for the erosion of traditional craft and wood carvings.

Storytellers also often reflect on the notion that the traditions and rituals they practice are the same that have been performed for years. In the story "Who will sleep?", the writer notes that "I am dancing to the same beats with my friends and family" that she did as a child, and that people in her community did many decades previously. In describing her community's unique festivities, she writes:

> *Every little note of a folk song, beat of a drum, cheers of the people takes [sic] my heart down the lane time when life was not easy but nevertheless people persisted and wrote history.*

The storyteller depicts her sense of connection to her community via the shared traditions and music of the festival and depicts the continuity of tradition in the village. Her description of how "people persisted and wrote history" even when "life was not easy" reflects the timelessness of the community space, noting people's refusal to let these rituals die. The use of the phrase "write history" is countered in a different story, written about a different community; "Why this hill festival features..." The storyteller of this tale says:

> *Our Faguli festival remains exactly the same. It has been passed down from one generation to another without any written documentation. The world has changed in many ways, but our people still collect sharuli grass in the forest, wear skirts made of grass and chase away the bad spirits.*

Here, the writer makes specific note of the fact that the festival has passed on "without written documentation", thus highlighting the importance of oral storytelling in keeping traditions alive. Orality has been a key feature of Indian culture for centuries (Handoo, 1994; Kambar, 1994), as is argued and explored in Chapter 6 of this thesis. Yet the ephemerality of the oral form is also expressed on VRI. In the story "A 600-year-old celebration on the shores of Pangong Lake" ("Pangong Lake"), the writer expresses his concern that these traditions will not survive: "I hope that this celebration, started by our ancestors nearly 600 years ago, won't get lost in time." The phrase "lost in time" reflects the dangers that await many such festivals and rituals, as well as the implication that other traditions have indeed been lost in time.

While traditional orality has been sufficient to maintain traditions thus far, the storytellers on the archive clearly are concerned at the pace of change that threatens these ways of living. The open digital archive of VRI, however, also makes these sacred rituals open to be explored by tourists.

Tourism and its complexities

Like the preservation of tradition, the growth of tourism is a central justification for Voices of Rural India's creation. Tourism underpins the entire website, from its home page to its call for funding and volunteers, as I have described in earlier sections. Here, I focus on tourism as a theme across the stories, as well as the complexities it invokes when mentioned. Several storytellers refer to tourism as something that is sought after and desirable to stimulate the communities they are from and reverse the loss of income many rural communities have faced ("Letters from the Bronze Age", "No Place like Home", "How One Man's Conviction..."). Tourism is seen as something that can both generate income and help sustain local traditions, as in the story "How a Remote Ladakhi Valley Transformed from Hunting to Conserving Wildlife" ("Ladakhi Valley"):

Over the years, tourism has brought prosperity to the villages in the Markha region. Homestays for trekkers and travellers bring a steady source of income. Village women make beautiful, handcrafted toys of snow leopard and other animals from wool in winter and sell those to tourists.

The story above focuses explicitly on the links between tourism, wealth, tradition, and nature, suggesting a positive relationship between these four themes; if tourism increases, villages become wealthier, and are able to better preserve their traditions and the natural world around them.

In other stories, tourism is seen as a learning tool, something which helps to bring modern ideas and education to communities without community members having to leave. The storyteller of "How one man's Conviction..." writes that: "For me, tourism has been my greatest teacher. It brought people from as many as 88 countries and all states of India to my guesthouse." The writer credits his diverse experiences and knowledge of the world – from speaking English, cooking Western food, and using technology – to tourism, which "brought people to my guesthouse". The storyteller explicitly links tourism to formal education, writing:

"My guesthouse became my university where I learnt many new skills." All the new skills described are associated with the Western knowledge, from learning English to cooking non-Indian food, thus suggesting the types of knowledge that are sought and valued via tourism.

Photographs on VRI also seek to attract tourists. Photography (and its mass use) has become a key tool for the creation and deployment of narratives around tourist destinations (Sontag, 2014) such that tourism becomes, as John Urry describes, a search for the photogenic (Urry, 1995) and the accumulation of photographs. Many of the photographs on VRI emphasise lush, scenic landscapes and downplay human presence; when humans are included in a photograph, they are small in comparison to the landscape they are in, and they are rarely the focus of the image. The images focus on wilderness with few "witness figures" (Bordo, 2000), thus making these communities feel sparsely populated (as many of them are), and untouched by the polluting hand of human presence. Many of the photos also emphasise distance and scale, to represent the vastness of nature (Pratt, 2003) and to create a sense of the photographer as master of the scene before them, thus signifying vantage as power. As Smith (S. P. Smith, 2018) argues, depopulated photographs and paintings of landscapes in former colonies like India signals to tourists that the land is authentic in its seemingly pre-civilised state, a kind of tabula rasa for the tourist to inscribe meaning upon (Mitchell, 2008). Some examples of these photographs are below:

Hilly taluka of Maharshtra. Photo: Mahadu Chindhu Kondar

Forests of Vindhyachal hills surrounding Chanderi. Photo: Muzaffar Ansari

Figure 23 Photographs from three stories on VRI, which highlight greenery, the natural landscape, and the scale of the backdrop

The stories dwell positively on tourism as an essential tool to revitalise communities. Yet the discussion of tourism in many of these contexts is at odds with the activities and sanctity of the rituals described in a number of the stories in this archive. Alongside the desire of tourism, many storytellers also describe their aforementioned fear or concern around modernity encroaching upon traditionally rural rituals, spaces and experiences. This concern evidently exculpates tourism from the potentially detrimental aspects it might have. It creates a type of idealised world where tourism financially benefits communities without irrevocably altering or damaging them. In other stories, there is some indication that unchecked tourism can do harm as well as good: the storyteller of "India's Largest Lake" observes that "The growth of the industrial sector...caused industrial waste to trickle into the lake. Increased tourism brought more boats than the lake could carry." In this lake's history, the burden of tourism proved unsustainable for the community and poisoned the lake, the very entity the storyteller wishes to protect. Earlier, I included a line from the story "Conviction", where the storyteller writes:

> *With rapid tourism growth, other things have changed rapidly in the region too. Villages have turned into towns with many concrete buildings. Local businesses and tourists are putting a burden on nature.*

Here, tourism occupies an uneasy role as both essential to the community for its financial benefits, and dangerous in its excess, as it may expedite "rapid" change. As discussed previously, the towns, concrete buildings and business expansion are seen here to be a harbinger of a destructive urban modernity that threatens the existence of rural spaces, traditions, and communities. However, this same storyteller is extremely positive about what tourism has taught him and given him, and advocates for it throughout the story.

This complex relationship with tourism is representative of the status it has for many of India's rural communities. In many stories on VRI, tourism is an almost mystical force that has the ability to restore traditions and wealth. In the earlier line "tourism is my greatest teacher", it is also evident that many of the storytellers anthropomorphise tourism, such that it takes on the role of a teacher or educator. It must be noted here that the type of tourism which the storytellers, and VRI as a website, advocate for is sustainable tourism, which is focused on preserving nature and the land and factoring this into tourist excursions.

The individual storytellers themselves do not often reflect on the complexities and inconsistencies and conflicts of tourism. Yet the stories are not meant to be read individually; we must consider the archive as a body of work of its own, where each story contributes a chapter in the larger book of Voices of Rural India. The ability to scroll from one community to another, or to quickly click from one story to another – as depicted in the 'Site Map' section – indicates the co-constructed nature of the archive. Across this large body of work, tourism is generally seen as a positive intervention by the builders of the archive, and by the editors and volunteers of the website, who themselves have a large role to play in platforming and writing these stories.

In advocating for tourism, the archive suggests that tourists can and should have access to the privacy and sanctity of rituals detailed in the archive, many of which are rituals even all community members do not have access to. Some stories explicitly call for tourists to come and visit: "Come, visit us, witness our festivals..." ("Palaiyars"), whereas some do so more implicitly. In doing this, the archive signals to us that tourists have access to all these spaces and traditions, and that tourists should be allowed to visit wherever they choose. Even in acting as mere "witnesses", rather than participants, the tourist gaze (Urry, 1995) consumes and intrudes upon the privacy of certain community acts. As the reader of these texts, I was struck by the question of whether tourists should have access at all to these rituals. Yet as Foster examines in his ethnographic study of a Japanese festival, communities may decide that "the only way to preserve the tradition would be to make it accessible to outsiders" (Foster, 2013). Seeing private or unique rituals is part of the entire tourist "experience", which encapsulates more than just the visual. However, the tourism described by the storytellers does more than just preserve traditions; it also seems to revive communities. Through a consideration of the word "tourism" as it appears throughout the stories, I analysed what is meant by this term in its usage across the VRI archive. Tourism is not valued for itself, but rather the wealth it generates: "People respected wildlife as it brought tourism, which in turn brought prosperity" ("How a Remote Ladakhi Valley..." What the storytellers are asking for or imagining through their stories is not tourism, but rather a world where these traditions do not fade, nature is protected, these communities stay close, and their inhabitants are financially secure. Tourism is the proposed solution, but in reading the stories, it becomes clear that the real enthusiasm of the storytellers is for their practices and communities – not the visits of

tourists. As the young storyteller of "Facing the Mountains of Life to Build a Career in Mountaineering" writes:

> *One day, I hope to summit the 14 highest peaks in the world. I also wish to develop tourism opportunities in my local area to enhance livelihood options and help make opportunities available especially for the girls in my region.*

There is a disconnect between the first and second sentence here in their differing aims and focuses. The *individual* aim is distinctive from the *community* aim, as noted in my earlier point regarding individual and public histories and pasts. This entire story focuses on the young woman's dream of mountaineering and her journey thus far; only in this late line is tourism referred to briefly. It is evident to the reader that it is mountaineering, not tourism, that occupies this storyteller's time and energy. Of course, these two aims are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but given the focus of tourism within the archive, its mention here acts as a cohesive motif to bind the stories together. The creation of VRI as a deliberate archive of stories necessitates these moments of thematic similarity and unity; yet in doing so, the "community" of storytellers takes priority over the "individual" storyteller.

Community vs the Individual

In one of my interviews with co-founder of VRI, Mallika Virdi, she detailed to me some of her concerns and grievances about individualism in the community she lived in, Munsiyari. In discussing the aims of the platform and the desire to preserve the community, she said:

> *In a place like Munsiyari…every kid has a smart phone, everyone's on Whatsapp, everyone's on Instagram. And I do feel very strongly that, you know, it's bad enough that we're losing community and contact and real interactions, but now everyone imagines that they're becoming celebrities, they can post about themselves…it's like self-advertisement to the extreme. So, you're just advertising yourself, [there's] no sense of privacy, no sense of you within a landscape,* ***it's just about you as an individual.*** (emphasis my own)

Mallika's words, particularly her final point, reflects some of the concerns in the stories on the platform. As I have discussed, older storytellers on the platform often note their problems with younger generations losing interest in tradition in favour of modernity and technology. Mallika specifically derides the way "everyone imagines they're becoming celebrities" and the "self-

advertisement" implicit in this. While these forms of "advertisement" via storytelling seem acceptable when they represent the community – as in the stories on VRI – advertising oneself is seen here as gauche and attention-seeking (S. P. Smith, 2021), even selfish. To serve the community is a noble cause; to advertise and promote oneself, it seems, is less so. The story "No Place Like Home" focuses on a storyteller who is deeply tied to his village and has chosen not to leave; he says:

> *I had no desire to study in an English medium school or to go abroad for higher studies. I completed my studies right in my native place in a government school and college. I never let go off [sic] an opportunity to connect with people here.*

The storyteller is proud of his decision to stay in his "native place"; in listing "studying in an English medium school" or "going abroad", the storyteller is not simply pulling from random examples, but clearly comparing himself to peers who have done these things. In "never letting go" of the opportunity to connect with people at home, the storyteller pits connection against isolation and community against individualism. Although the text does not explicitly criticise the decision to pursue change and leave the community, the storyteller concludes by saying, "I'd rather be content living in my village and striving to make it better than chasing success and happiness elsewhere." "Living" here is countered by the word "chasing" in the translation, a verb that implies a less secure movement. The editor and storyteller together create a sense of uncertainty in moving away versus security and peace in staying in one's community. These positive reflections on Wayanad, the village in question, are punctuated by photos of its beauty and scenic landscapes.

Banasura Sagar Dam impounds the Karamanathodu river, a tributary of Kabani river, near Mothakkara. Photo: Vaibhavcho, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons

Figure 24 A photograph from "No Place Like Home", featuring the caption included in the story

Neither Mallika Virdi nor the storyteller of "No Place Like Home" seemed to understand the appeal of individualism or of moving away from one's community. Mallika also discussed the community's attempt at setting up an Instagram page, Voices of Munsiyari, and how young people preferred to have their own Instagram pages:

> *...Initially [Voices of Munsiyari] did very well because people did take photos of themselves, but it was always in the context of Munsiyari...but as soon as the young people saw the potential, they started their own channels. It's such a massive push to individuate and become the star of your channel...*

Mallika reflects on the "push to individuate" as one that derives from external pressures, rather than necessarily an entirely internal drive. The "push" is likened to something foreign that comes from outside the community, rather than something that derives from within. Nevertheless, the "young people" in this story are once again criticised for starting new channels. As I discussed in an earlier section, young people are seen as both representations of and seduced by modernity, and this modernity is seen as encroaching on traditional communities like Munsiyari.

One important thread of the theme of community versus individualism was the way in which technology was so often twinned with individualism and modernity, both by storytellers and Mallika herself. In Mallika's quote above, "starting [their] own channels" on Instagram is seen as the desire to break free of the community. Ironically, it is technology and social media which is used to drive support for Voices of Rural India. The same social media platform that allows "Voices of Munsiyari" can also be host to other, more personal pages.

Across the website, too, storytellers often reference this paradoxical frustration with technology. In "Morung", the writer says: "Young boys, instead of learning about their culture, now spend more time playing on cell phones". *Play* – instead of work – is a central verb here, but so too is the "cell phone" as the object of distraction, the direct contrast to spending time in the Morung. This is related to Sean P. Smith's assertion that modern tourists in search of authentic experiences disavow rather than enthusiastically embrace technology (S. P. Smith, 2021), so as to seek out an "authentic" experience (MacCannell, 2013). In this story, the storyteller is videoed on a camera phone talking about the cultural site of the Morung, and the story itself is captured and uploaded via technology. It is normal to use aspects of technology while being more widely concerned with "technology" as an abstract concept that

erodes culture and creates distance. This is even more true in many of these rural communities, where technology is both hard-won and exotic in its relatively rarity. In "Letters from the Bronze Age", the storyteller notes that "to find an internet connection to interact with the outside world, I must walk for hours or ride a horse". It is thus little wonder that technology takes on the role of a powerful and destabilising force in communities that have hitherto managed without many aspects of it.

Mallika Virdi's feelings about the role of social media as a distraction for younger villagers contrasted my own lived experience of technology. As a young millennial, I have grown up with platforms such as Instagram and Facebook and largely taken these forms of expression for granted. I could not blame the younger generation for being so curious and interested in technology or in leaving their villages. Indeed, the narrative of amateurism is such that it is sold as a transitory phase, where one might be able to "be discovered" (Bryan-Wilson & Piekut, 2020) and subsequently become famous, or at least be paid for one's artistic work. I observed that the voice of the individual is relatively subdued in the archive on VRI, leading to a dilemma of community storytelling: it may mean *only* being heard when part of a community. The dismissal of individuals using social media platforms is also a dismissal of telling individual stories. In the same interview, Mallika noted it was a "pity" when storytellers from rural communities do not use their environments and local landscapes to shape their stories: "If stories are not rooted in their reality, then it's like any other story." Clearly 'any other story' is a dismissal; these storytellers are meant to have unique stories to tell and unique communities to draw from. Yet for a story to be "rooted in...reality" does not have to mean rooted – or otherwise chained – to the place they come from. In Mallika's words, and in the story "No Place Like Home", community storytelling is something which could potentially impact individual freedoms and choice. If storytellers do not have freedom to tell stories away from their own "reality", then the community is not a source of inspiration as much as it is a weight. Community storytelling need not necessarily preclude individual storytelling, but it is difficult to sustain both forms of communicative labour. The literary freedoms or leisure time that are available to wealthy or metropolitan writers are not the same as those available to those tasked with writing from, and for, a community. The contrast between this chapter and the platforms spotlighted in Chapter 4 is testament to this.

The representation of "uncomfortable topics"

Stories on the website focus specifically on plots involving nature, sustainability, tradition, and community culture. The stories are largely positive or solution-oriented where the former is not possible, and often avoid what I term *uncomfortable issues*. By this I mean themes which upset the impression of communities that are idyllic, or opinions which betray a dissatisfaction with community opinion. I focus here specifically on identity as an "uncomfortable topic", due to the dominance of various types of violence against specific communities in modern India. First, I consider the theme of gendered discrimination on Voices of Rural India. Approximately half the storytellers on VRI are women or girls. The theme of women's empowerment is not explicitly stated as an objective of the website, but the Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF), which funds VRI, does list the empowerment of women as one of its programmes on its official website (Digital Empowerment Foundation, 2023). Specifically, it seeks to help rural women in India access and subsequently use the Internet. Despite this aim, the specific experience of being a woman is not often critically examined and discussed within the stories on VRI, though it does appear as a theme across a few stories. There is also a distinction between those stories which deliberately focus on gender and the role of women in the community, and those which incidentally mention gender as something which separates access to spaces within the community ("The Walking Library", "Colours of the Earth", "No Place Like Home"). These latter stray observations hint at a wider landscape of gendered divides and norms that stray from the largely positive messaging of VRI, and furthermore complicate the question of access for all travellers. If women from the community are not able to enter certain spaces, how can women from outside the community hope to visit? For example, in "The Legend of a British Runaway in a Remote Uttarakhand Valley" ("British Runaway"), the young female storyteller describes a shawl that is the remaining artefact of the eponymous British runaway. She notes, "I've never seen the shawl since it is kept in the inner part of the temple where women are not allowed", before describing it based on what her Mama[20] has told her. Despite her role as the storyteller, she does not have access to all spaces in her own community – nor, therefore her own story – due to her gender. The shawl as a relic which is inaccessible by the women of community is particularly ironic, given that the shawl is a garment typically worn and used by women. However, the shared description of the shawl –

[20] 'Uncle'

seen by the uncle, described by his niece, translated by a volunteer of VRI – represents the co-construction of meaning deployed on Voices of Rural India. The reader thus experiences the perspective of all three of these figures, though only one of them can actually see the shawl. Yet a female traveller would be similarly excluded from the temple; the story as an act of inviting tourism is complicated by the necessary sanctity of the temple space. Only via the story can the female reader-as-tourist be transported to the temple's inner sanctum at all. Thus, storytelling acts as a method of travel that transports the reader without the inconvenience of gendered limitations that prevent access to certain spaces.

Some stories focus more explicitly on the goal of inspiring young women and girls and increasing opportunities for women in the community. The story "One Ladakhi Girl's Journey from Darkness to Light" ("Ladakhi Girl") focuses specifically on the female storyteller's own story of bringing clean energy to other villages. The storyteller dwells on her own position as a role model in these communities:

> *Today, it feels so good when women of my own community consider me a role model. Wherever I go, they tell me, we want our daughters to be like you. This only makes me more acutely aware of my responsibilities. So, I try to educate women and girls in every village I visit. I also speak on many platforms to motivate them, and tell them that if they are determined, they can solve any problem in their lives, and that of others.*

The nature of this excerpt, and indeed much of the story, is that of a moralistic tale. Many stories on VRI take this format, but unlike stories about nature or sustainability – where the storyteller often describes the problem as ongoing and in need of support – in the context of gender equality, the problem is seen as one that is "solved". For example, in this story, the storyteller's tale is clearly a success story, with a generic moral: "if they are determined, they can solve any problem in their lives, and that of others". The solution to the lack of opportunities for women is "determination". Sometimes the storyteller makes a more explicit emotional gesture towards saving nature, as in "Magical Flying Lanterns of Purushwadi" ("Flying Lanterns"), which ends with the line: "So, with folded hands, I make one appeal. Save nature! Save life!" Folded hands are often used as a respectful gesture of greeting or farewell in India, but they are also an indication of pleading, suggesting the sincerity of the storyteller's urgent request. "Ladakhi Girl" ends on a much more positive note; the storyteller says, "And

in the end, do what you can, with what you have, from where you are!". Through these two contrasts, the issue of woman's inequality is depicted as something which can be resolved, and the story becomes an inspirational example to follow. In doing so, VRI shifts the focus from problem to solution. In writing stories about positive experiences of community life, VRI chooses a certain type of tourist authenticity. Although authenticity is highly valued by adventurous tourists (MacCannell, 2013), only specific forms of travel authenticity are seen as valuable and desirable. For example, uncomfortable living quarters might be seen as part of a "real" travel experience – though even these discomforts cannot be endured for long (Mura, 2015). I argue that sexism in society and other forms of identity discrimination are not tolerable aspects of authentic tourist experiences, because they exclude certain tourists from specific sites and places, as well as reminding tourists of the potential dangers they may face in travel. Such discrimination also may necessitate significant behaviour modification from tourists. For instance, solo female travellers may be unable to access places like inner temples and may be advised to travel in groups or stay inside at night. In the long term, these forms of exclusion make it difficult to entice tourists and are seen as risky or unwelcoming by tourists themselves. Rather than focus on these elements of the communities, therefore, the archive focuses on the aspects of gendered discrimination which do not present an issue for those visiting.

Caste (and its absence)

As a sub-theme of the broader theme of "uncomfortable topics" (and their absence on the archive), I now move to a consideration of caste on Voices of Rural India. Caste shapes personal and professional interactions in India. I refer specifically to the oppression of members of Scheduled Castes, Islamophobic violence and abuse, and increasingly the persecution of anyone seen to be "anti-Hindu" (Cháirez-Garza et al., 2022; S.J et al., 2014; Viswanath, 2014). There are no stories about similar abuses on Voices of Rural India due to the website's focus on inviting tourism. However, there are moments in the stories that disrupt the impression of the communities as being egalitarian and idyllic. Some of the stories do draw on ideas of caste and colonialism ("British Runaway", "How Love Has Changed After 4 Generations"), which suggest divides and complications in the histories being told; others dwell briefly on the patriarchal nature of these villages and communities, but at the end when it comes to the 'moral' of the story, these have uncomplicated endings which focus on positive messages. Only occasionally do the writers express anger or sadness towards these issues.

In the story "How Love Has Changed...", the storyteller focuses explicitly on caste in her community:

> *Two decades ago, it was unacceptable for someone from the General category to choose a partner from the Scheduled Tribes. If they liked each other and wanted to get married, they could either elope, or give in to family pressure and separate from each other. For Brahmins, it was worse. If they dared to marry outside their caste, their families would disown them, and even perform their (symbolic) last rites! The wrath of casteism is brutal in our society and persists even today.*

The editor includes a commentary on "the wrath of casteism in our society", implying that casteism and caste violence are still dominant in the society of this village; that it is not an escape from these problems. This line is slightly different in the Hindi version of this story. A better translation would be that "even today, there is a lot of pressure in/on the caste system". The English translation exists as a more eloquent conclusion to this issue, while also providing emotive commentary on the issue of caste, by labelling it "brutal". This is also a rare mention in a story of the caste identity of the people featured in it. Scheduled Tribes represent the most disadvantaged socio-economic groups in India; in this story, about 80% of the local community belongs to a scheduled tribe. Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes also experience high levels of discrimination in Indian society in various ways (Guru, 2011; Mosse, 2018). The speaker notes that unlike many non-arranged marriages in the village, her own marriage was accepted because the couple "belonged to the same caste". In doing so, she signals her own difference to many others in her community.

Caste is such a disruptive topic to include on Voices of Rural India because it is something that Western tourists cannot fully understand and Indian tourists are complicit in (see (Bharti, 2018, Thorat et al., 2012). The discussion of caste is potentially destructive to tourism activities because the existence of caste discrimination and divides shatters the idyll of "one" community. and produces clear points of difference and rupture within community settings. While "community" on VRI is often presented as a fixed, identifiable, and single structure, caste shows the fault lines and illusion in this thinking. The story "How Love Has Changed..." indicates the punishment in store for couples who cross caste lines. The existence of casteism in these communities repudiates the myth of multiple religions and identities coming together over shared festivals (Bandyopadhyay et al., 2008) that is so predominant in Indian tourist

advertising. "Community" is thus challenged, since the community is made up of groups that discriminate against each other.

Analysis: Themes on Voices of Rural India

After reading through the website in detail and analysing all fifty stories on Voices of Rural India, I find that the purpose of the archive is manifold. While the website does accurately capture some of its own aims in its "Initiative" section, it does not consider its role in creating narratives to encourage tourists to visit these places. Although this form of digital storytelling does encourage the "authentic voices" that VRI speaks of on its website in many ways, it is constrained and inhibited by its dual role as a tourism platform. As Zhang et al. argue, this creates "speech acts" rather than true voice, due to the performance of speaking for a Western or, in this case, a non-rural audience (Zhang et al., 2012). The contexts in which readers 'hear' Indian regional voices are so often in neoliberal contexts (Gajjala & Birzescu, 2010). The structures of tourism, particularly to postcolonial countries such as India, often produce tropes or certain types of narratives which are more focused on the tourist's experience than the speaker's. Yet, despite this, there is a clear effort on the archive to challenge the way readers and tourists hear and read native voices, via the use of translation and multimedia content. Although the purpose of writing tourist narratives is greatly limiting, the reader does nevertheless have access to heard voices and non-English text in new and exciting ways on Voices of Rural India.

The overarching theme that runs through many of these stories is that of tradition; tradition as something to preserve and to prevent the loss of. All the storytellers on VRI, and the founders of the platform themselves, are extremely proud of the traditions their communities had upheld for so long. Yet inextricable from this sense of pride is the fear that these rituals will be lost to time and to the encroachment of urban spaces upon rural communities. Loss permeates these stories; the fear of a loss that has not yet happened, and the knowledge of a loss that is seemingly unstoppable. Storytelling in this sense acts as a way to remember and store the past against the uncertainty of the future. Regardless of the product, storytelling on Voices of Rural India is emphasised as a *process,* a form of communal creative labour between writer, editor, translator, volunteers, and website designers. While the stories are credited to one person, editors, translators, volunteers, and website designers all contribute to the story in some way. The reader and the potential tourist, too, play key roles as audience members

and active participants in these stories. The archive must be seen and read as one cohesive body of work. Without knowing each other and without even occupying the same communities, the writers of Voices of Rural India are in conversation with each other about a shared rural experience, each writing chapters in a larger work about the preservation of rural traditions. The work of storytelling is thus shared– though not equally – between writers, readers, editors and more. In the sharing of these memories and past histories with others, the archive manages to draw out stories and experiences that may otherwise have been lost. This work is done for the community, by the community; individualism is a limited concept on Voices of Rural India.

The concept of "community" underpins many of the stories, yet what is *meant* by community is sometimes elusive. The existence of community perhaps necessitates exclusion, the separation of the group from the outside world. The fractures even within the communities detailed on VRI are rarely discussed, as I argue above. The reader is presented with community voices rather than individual voices. As such, we are not privy to moments of personal tension or any personal emotions that challenge the wider community. Even in reading, we read the archive, rather than as separated elements or individual stories. In isolation, many of these stories seem uncomplicated, simple memories of life in a rural community. Yet just as the archive strives to emphasise community over individualism, so too does the archive read best when taken as a collection of stories, rather than separated individual experiences.

Conclusion

The archive, as presented in this chapter, is a space of great promise and hopefulness about the future, while redressing some of the inequalities of the past. In creating a new space for rural storytellers to share their stories, histories, and knowledge, Voices of Rural India gestures to the archive as a site of world-building, or world-*reb*uilding. The digital archive thus functions as a remapping of the world, allowing and encouraging the user-as-tourist to travel to a utopian space of postcolonial potential.

These are optimistic proclamations, and as I draw attention to throughout this chapter, there are many other elements of VRI's design and use that recreate the imperial "world-picture" (Kaul, 2009) that the archives of British Empire create. Firstly, the uses of English across the website gesture to the inextricability of English with power in knowledge production, dissemination, and across digital technologies. By marketing this website towards an English-

speaking audience, VRI raises a central question: who is the archive *for?* Does the archive seek to capture the stories of rural storytellers so that members of these communities might be able to reconsider these narratives in the future? I argue that by offering a bilingual– but primarily English– website experience, Voices of Rural India instead indicates that it is positioned towards English-speaking readers and users, with indigenous readers as an afterthought.

Relatedly, the archive as a means to generate tourism – and its funding by tourist bodies – highlights the uncomfortable relationship between the desires of the tourist and that of the silenced colonial subject. Tourism invites the public to witness and experience often highly personal practices, sometimes appropriating and exhibiting the private and intimate (Battiste & Henderson, 2000). As this chapter discusses, some of these experiences are not offered even to everyone within a particular village community. The archive thus misrepresents space as something available to all readers or travellers, and all experience as freely available for reproduction. The digital archive as funded by a tourism body must marginalise some stories for others that are more interesting or represent stories as easily digestible and understandable. Its central function is to market, alongside the mission to preserve and capture stories. By presenting these stories as freely available and accessible, does the archive echo colonial definitions of indigenous space and experience as being open to all to enter, conquer, and own?

This question is not clearly answerable, but the considerations it provokes are of great significance to this work, and to the work of anyone hoping to build new archives tools, platforms, and other digital objects which *write back to* imperial constructs of history. Roopika Risam's clear call for a postcolonial digital humanities is central to this chapter. She asserts that any modern archive attempting to rewrite the imperial archive must acknowledge, and seek to resist, the lure of tools and tropes which define the work of the historical archive (2019, p. 49). The postcolonial digital archive must be a space where communities whose stories have not before been told can freely and accessibly do so. At present, economic pressures via the tourist industry mean that this is not entirely possible for Voices of Rural India.

I nevertheless maintain that VRI, and the postcolonial digital archive as a form, is a space of great potential. In the constant responsiveness of the archive, new stories can be told; tools can be reimagined and reformed, and practices can be changed. As hypertext pioneer Michael Joyce writes: "Print stays itself; electronic text replaces itself...with electronic text we are always painting, each screen unreasonably washing away what was and replacing it with itself"

(1992, p. 89). We are "always printing", never printed. The ever-changing and dynamic nature of digital archives means that reimaginations of what the archive is and who it is for can be formed again and again. It is important that on Voices of Rural India, storytellers, editors, and volunteers come together to build a space where some stories are captured and preserved, and that they make a concerted effort to do this in the "original voice" of the storyteller. VRI does not represent a utopian space, but rather a world-making effort in progress. The postcolonial – even *de*colonial – digital archive cannot exist without these movements in the direction of expanding opportunities for voice, speaking, and being heard, with storytellers using whatever technologies and tools that are available to them.

Chapter 6. Heard Mentality: Pasts, Presents and Futures of Orality

And then she cry'd, "That tongue, for this thy crime,
Which could so many subtle tales produce,
Shall be hereafter but of little use.
Hence 'tis she prattles in a fainter tone,
With mimick sounds, and accents not her own.

- The Transformation of Echo from Metamorphoses by Ovid (1794), translated by Sir Samuel Garth, John Dryden, et. al

"If you lose your story..." He paused for a few moments. "You know, whose story wins? Whose story is heard?"

- Sruthin Lal, executive director and co-founder of LoreKeepers, interview with Nayana Prakash

Orality is political, personal, and powerful. This chapter uses examples of the oral tradition in India, as mediated by technology, to tell a story of oral culture through the ages. I argue that orality is a multifaceted tool, used for both discipline and resistance, and use specific examples from a wide swathe of Indian history to examine *who* has been allowed to share stories, and whose voices are heard. Throughout this chapter, I examine the importance of oral storytelling in India while contending with the impact technology has on multiple forms of speaking.

Introduction

The first of the two excerpts above is from Ovid's *Metamorphoses,* telling the story of Echo, a nymph who is cursed by the goddess Juno so that she can no longer speak. Though she longs

to tell Narcissus of her love, she can only "wait[s] for the rebound/To catch his voice, and to return the sound." She is only able to repeat what others say, and when she dies, only her voice is left behind, echoing forever.

The ability to speak has long been of great significance to postcolonial scholarly debates, hence the relevance of voice to this work. Feminist scholar Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak, whose renowned essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) introduced new productive intertwinings of feminist and postcolonial theory, was fascinated by the character of Echo. Spivak sees Echo as a kind of subaltern figure, reflecting, in her eponymous essay on the subject, that the character "has to be" female (1993, p. 26). In Echo's fate we see a woman cursed, doomed to have "no identity proper to [itself]". Only when someone else speaks can she echo back; only in certain contexts is Echo allowed a voice, or rather a sound. She is thus – as Spivak elucidates – not really speaking at all, because her voice has no productive meaning, and is not listened to. The subaltern, as Spivak unequivocally concludes, *cannot* speak (de Kock, 1992, p. 44).

The second quote I include above is from a rather more recent source; an interview I held with Sruthin Lal, the executive director and co- founder of ARPO (the Archival and Research Project), which runs a storytelling archive project called LoreKeepers. The Kerala-based non-profit organisation describes its practice as "digital archiving, multimedia storytelling, research, community engagement and interventions to preserve and promote our pluralistic cultural heritage". LoreKeeper contributors use smartphones to record stories on audio or video, which they then submit to the archive. In our interview, when discussing why LoreKeepers was so important, Sruthin offered the above comment. What, indeed, happens to someone who loses their story - or even their voice? We do not know, because we *cannot* know; the answer, like the story, is lost.

This chapter will begin the work of linking India's oral past with its oral present and possible futures, to consider how this communicative form facilitates and limits voice(s), agency, and stories. I focus on the *voice* in storytelling, as well as the role that technology plays in recording, capturing, or retrieving this voice. I refer here to orality, a verbal expression of thought and story (Ong, 2003). Orality has long been the traditional conveyor of folklore, religious chanting, music, and performance. Sruthin's questions – "Whose story wins? Whose story is heard?" – remind us to consider not just what stories are told, but *how* they are told, and who gets to hear them. Moving away from a platform-specific focus, I examine specific moments and

examples of the oral tradition in Indian culture, as well as a thematic convergence of the oral in technology and culture. In doing so, I contend with the pluralities and contradictions of the oral form: its ability to *rewrite* or *retell* lost histories, but also its use as a disciplinary form. The oral is both mediated by technologies and is a technology itself.

To productively frame this chapter, I engage with the following questions:

- Why is the relationship between the oral tradition and technology significant in India?
- How do these oral traditions facilitate some forms of speaking, while limiting others?
- Who is included in these forms?

The specific chapter questions address the overarching question that this thesis seeks to answer: *What makes technology-facilitated storytelling in India important?*

In considering these questions, I turn to the highly influential essay by Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", and the debates it raises. Since the publication of that work in 1988, numerous writers have routinely issued rebuttals, criticisms, and discussions of Spivak's work. It has become commonplace to see variations on the theme, with wry replacements of the final verb (e.g.: Can the Subaltern Tweet? (Trillò, 2018)) These arguments gesture to the enormous relevance of Spivak's work even today, as well as a clear desire to provide new "evidence" that her thesis is wrong, and that new technologies – Twitter, for example – can elevate the voice of the subaltern. It is hard to resist the clarion call of Spivak's provocation to find new ways or contexts in which the subaltern can speak. This chapter, while influenced by Spivak, does not seek to argue in this fashion. New technologies cannot abolish pervasive systems and confines of class, race, and gender, and it is limiting to analyse digital modes of storytelling and speaking purely from this binary. Rather than engaging with a "yes or no" response to Spivak's question, I argue that "Can the Subaltern Speak?" is most productively reframed as a *series* of questions, which this chapter seeks to do.

These questions consider voice and inclusion, context, and tradition, suggesting ways that orality has been used as both a conduit for agency, as well as a restriction of it. Due to the fast-growing and swiftly changing nature of the audio revolution in India, this chapter is largely focused on India's oral past, and its implications for a technology-mediated oral future. I will be focusing on examples of technology, orality, and the multiple meanings and uses of

storytelling in India and demonstrate significant uses of the oral form throughout Indian history, including its present.

Modes of Orality: Resistance

Later in this chapter, I use examples from Indian archives to demonstrate how digital oral culture is a form of resistance to the textual hegemony of both the Internet and of historical recordkeeping. In many ways, orality defies systematic categorisation; hence, this chapter is divided into key themes. The most common use of orality is in everyday conversation; the most beloved and known oral stories are those spoken to us as bedtime stories or in youth. Orality represents an intimacy that makes formalising these stories a challenge for researchers such as myself. There has been relatively little information on these phenomena to cite on Wikipedia, the "world's encyclopaedia", for example, because of the latter's reliance on textual knowledge (Prabhala, 2011). The primacy, even the *imperiousness* of literacy (Ong, 2003) and its association with Western colonialism, has rendered oral forms of knowledge and ways of being redundant and dated. Few, if any, cultures now can survive with what Walter J Ong calls *primary orality*. In a postcolonial context, orality is a form of resistance to standardised writing and the dominance of colonial language protocols and norms (Ashcroft et al., 1995). While oral communication is a natural way to tell stories, its absence in widely-disseminated forms of communication such as those discussed in this thesis – such as books and Internet platforms – makes it appear rare. It can be scholarly, devotional, repetitive, or emotional; it can be word-based or reliant more on *sound*. Its usage can at times be a defiance of the neatly structured distance of writing; it is a rejection of such impersonal technology (Ong, 2003). In the present day, Thomas Pettitt argues that we are seeing a re-emergence of orality across modern technology which has not been seen since before the invention of the Gutenberg Press (Pettitt, 2007). Though this is a Western-oriented view of writing, print, and orality across history, Pettitt's assertion is critical to this chapter's exploration of the resurgence of the oral form in technology that is explored later in this chapter. The oral has never been more relevant to being studied, nor so difficult to capture across its various forms and modes.

Secondary Orality and Sound

Voice as power is central to this analysis of orality. Voices are not equal. Whose voices do we imbue with meaning? Whose voices do we fall silent to listen to? When, and how, are people allowed to speak?

This chapter focuses on voice as *secondary orality,* which Ong defines as orality that is dependent on a literate culture but can also mean orality that is dependent on technologies, such as the radio, television, or the Internet[21] (2003, p. 11). I analyse specific examples of websites, tools, or practices where technology facilitates or transmits oral communication. Ong's work is crucial to this chapter. Ong argues that the oral world is "mobile, warm, personally interactive." (2003, p. 79). Writing, on the other hand, can be detached and distant; we can access words written many centuries ago, while equivalent oral traditions are only accessible to us via transcription of these events. Thus, orality offers us a bond with the listener, a closeness borne of speaking to someone and listening to the sound of their voice (Steingo & Sykes, 2019). While the word "voice" is often used metonymically to refer to human expression and agency in a variety of forms (Couldry, 2010), literal, physical, and spatial qualities of voice are important. What makes hearing voices different to reading text? To speak, and just as importantly, to *hear,* is a physical interaction between two bodies, triggered not only by the content but also by the ineffable qualities of sound: a choked-up voice, a lump in one's throat (Jacobson, 2021, p. 131). Sound in this example, and many others, acts before the full meaning of the content can be conveyed; we react similarly naturally to cries, shouts, and screams, which deliver meaning before they can be fully understood. Voice reminds us of the bodily reality of sound, of the physicality of voice and how it emanates from another person. This is still true in situations of secondary orality, such as listening to a podcast, as Jacobson's work explores.

Yet voice differs from other sounds in the potential and weight it carries for meaning: "[I]t is as if there is an arrow in it which raises the expectation of meaning, the voice is an opening toward meaning" (Dolar, 2006). When people speak, we expect meaning; we imbue voice with more potential significance than other sounds. However, bound up in class, race, gender, and other characteristics that may attenuate or amplify its potential for being listened to.

"Sonic Discipline"

In reading this chapter, the reader must themselves listen carefully. Voice only has power and significance if it is heard, and actively listened to (Couldry, 2010). The role of the listener is

[21] Ong's writing predates the emergence of the modern Internet, and specifically the oral components of Internet technologies which this chapter engages with.

of great significance in oral storytelling because the listener must pay particular attention not only to speech, but also to the interstitial silences of communication. Here, I coin the term *sonic disciplining,* with reference to Roshanak Khesti's discussion of how to listen (Kheshti, 2015). Listening is not passive, and the listener's own "wants and needs" in what they perceive cannot be understated. Listening is "a directed, learned activity; it is a definite cultural practice" (Sterne, 2003, p. 19); it can be performed well or badly. *Sonic disciplining* suggests the active participation and rigour of the listener in shaping orality, as well as the ways in which the listener must strive to understand and listen to sounds and voices which are unfamiliar to them. This is a dedicated practice, much as oratory skill is. Kheshti's work details how much of modern music production is made with middle-class white listeners in mind, thus suggesting the many voices that are not heard or considered valuable to mainstream Western audiences. In this way, a listener engaging in sonic discipline is seeking not simply to "be a good listener"– a phrase which suggests obedience and quiet – but rather to decolonise their listening practice and be attuned to a wider array of sound. In this chapter, the reader must attempt a form of textual sonic discipline to understand and inhabit the sounds and space that this work documents.

Analysis

Orality and Discipline: India's Historic Oral Traditions

Orality is a disciplinary tool which allows only some voices to be heard. Controlled orality, which this section explores, demands great rigour from the speaker, and yet also denies this speaker a true creative *voice.* In this section, I engage with two prominent forms of Indian orality – which highlight the enormous significance of *physical* voice in storytelling, while subjugating the *figurative* voice (in the form of agency and self-expression). Without written tools as an aide-mémoire, oral stories have traditionally required repetition and mnemonics to encourage memorisation. It is not only speech itself which is important, but – as Spivak argues in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) – the conditions and context of the speaker. This section closely examines the role of voice in the Vedas, an ancient Indian oral text, and Carnatic music, a form of Indian classic music. These oral practices are a common thread through India's past and its present, representing for many people the manifestation of orality in Indian culture. However, as this chapter demonstrates, they are also highly exclusive and exclusionary practices with limited capacity for voice. Carnatic music and Vedic chanting are not forms of

storytelling; they represent forms of transmission rather than stories, and they are deeply rooted in religious practice. Yet they are nevertheless forms of expression, communication, and orality that have influenced key forms of storytelling in India, especially religious stories and song. Furthermore, these examples of oral expression are suggestive about the role of the artist and their constrained capacity for self-expression within the expectations of form.

Voice is also a technology of its own. I examine the discipline of the Carnatic singer in this section as one which mimics and even *becomes* machine in its performance of orality. Donna Haraway's work indicates the richness of considering the body and machine as interwoven, "theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism – in short, cyborgs" (Haraway & Wolfe, 2016, p. 7). The voice as machine (and mediated by machines) is also explored by Miriama Young in her work on the human voice and sound technology (2016). She argues that "the human voice...is a highly sophisticated piece of machinery – perhaps the most elaborate and altogether mysterious piece of technology yet invented" (2016, p. 6). The voice as technology is particularly relevant in examples of *controlled* or disciplined orality, suggesting the use of the voice – and the body it emanates from – as a tool.

Vedic transmission

Vedic transfer represents a form of bodily rigour and oral discipline, but also reflects the limited nature of orality to *give voice* to large communities of people. Only in a limited sense can voices be heard, and only some voices are capable of being heard at all. For many historians and theorists, oral tradition in India – perhaps even in the world – begins with the Vedas, ancient Hindu oral "texts" which has been transmitted orally for over three thousand years. Certainly, the Vedas represent the most significant aspect of *Hindu* oral tradition. Despite the early implementation of writing, the Vedas are powerful and authoritative only when recited by Brahmins, India's priestly caste. The Four Vedas (called Sruti, "something revealed and heard by sages") are a combination of religious and ritual poetry, prose and ritual formulae (Witzel, 2003). As numerous scholars have described, the method of transmission is a highly formalised programme of instruction between teacher (or guru) and student. Remarkably, it is not only the words of 1500-500 BCE that remain, but also the cadence and tonal accent which have been preserved till present day (Witzel, 2003). Theoretically, then, Vedic chanting is not merely an homage to the past, and to God, but also a resuscitation of "the breath of God". Indeed, breath –its manifestation, regulation, and meaning – is of great significance both within

the Vedas and in its chanting, as the long recitation requires enormous breath management. Such fidelity to an original source, memorisation, and bodily discipline reflects a human mimicry of a machine-like, technological quality of capture.

Vedic transmission continues to present day, although inevitably on a smaller scale. However, the importance of the Vedas is not merely in their continued existence, but in their framing of orality. The Vedas demonstrate the importance of memory in oral transmission, as described earlier. The formulaic repetition and rigidity of priestly training (Fuller, 2001) represent ways of ensuring that the Vedas could be remembered through ritual and routine, without textual cues. Its survival to this day is due to highly structured mnemonics which help students memorise structure, tone, and content. Yet Hindu Vedic tradition is about more than simply orality as memory. Vedic – the sound of religious words, the collective chant – is about the power of sound, and the notion that speaking things makes them *real, true, and authoritative.* Through orality, words come alive.

Aside from the feat of memory and sound as power that the Vedas represent, one oft-ignored aspect of Vedic transmission is the exclusivity of their transfer. It was not Hindu culture, but specifically *Brahmin* culture that circulated the Vedas, and they were not divulged to the broader Hindu community, specifically women and also subaltern men such as the Sudras (Olivelle, 2008). Together, these groups comprised 95% of the population. Patrick Olivelle details the ways in which Brahmin hegemony and control over scripture meant that the Vedas were withheld from those outside this caste. As he writes, "the only existence of the Vedas was within the memory of educated Brahmins" (2008, p. 215). Olivelle's account reminds us that oral forms of communication can be withheld and limited in their circulation. If voice in Vedic recitation represents power, then the *restriction* of voice reflects the inability of many Indians to access this power. Orality is more than just a method of communication in this context, but a tool which is sharpened for some elite few and wielded over others. The inability to speak in this context is a type of forced silence, as only some voices can be heard in this context.

Carnatic music and gendered oral discipline

Orality as a widespread disciplinary practice for women specifically is evident across many devotional genres, but specifically Carnatic music. I focus on Indian Carnatic music as an example of the ways orality, voice, agency, and gender are bound together, and how identity influences the dissemination of voice. Through Carnatic musical practice, orality is a form of

gendered performance, a tool of control as well as limited freedom. Vocal training – particularly in music or orature – reflect the technologising of the voice, the rendering of the body into a more polished tool with a desirable sound.

Carnatic music is a form of South Indian classical music typically performed by upper-caste women. In the early 20th century, it experienced a revival in performance in concert-halls and and music organisations in Madras (now Chennai). Carnatic music was a form of devotional singing that allowed women the opportunity to perform publicly while maintaining demureness and traditionally acceptable values (Weidman, 2006).

Aside from Carnatic music's significance as an Indian oral tradition, it also represents a personal and familial form of orality for me. I first became interested in the comparison of Carnatic music as a representation of gendered artistic expression through interviewing my grandmother, which I did as part of my initial work for this thesis[22]. My grandmother practiced and sometimes performed Carnatic music in Bangalore until the 2010s, when she and her voice aged out of regular singing. All my life, I had thought of my grandmother as someone who loved music and singing, but she revealed to me that she had never really cared much about performing or pursuing Indian classical music. Her parents, however, had not wanted her to study outside of her village, and her mother in particular thought she should be married at eighteen. Carnatic music offered a way – perhaps the only way – for her to continue semi-professional, independent, and artistic practice after marriage.

In singing publicly, Carnatic singers mimic some of the qualities of the guru/student dynamic in Vedic chanting, but unlike this relationship, it is women (though specifically upper-caste women) who are traditionally the most successful and popular Carnatic singers. In Amanda Weidman's ethnographic study on gender and the politics of voice in Carnatic singing circles, she observes the "construction" of voice, specifically "the ways women learn to speak so that they will be heard" (2006, p. 195). While Carnatic singing "allows" women's voices to be heard, Mrinhalini Sinha argues that we must be critical of such endeavours, instead looking at the particular voices that women assume, or are allowed to assume (Sinha, 1996). Women could

[22] Due to our relationship, and the fact that she is not strictly a storyteller, she is not included in the interview list for this thesis.

practice Carnatic music because it could be learned and practiced at home, with a private tutor. While many forms of orality are "solely dependent on meeting people" (Finnegan, 1990, p. 134), Carnatic music could be domesticated and confined to the home, or at least to private spaces. Carnatic music training thus offered women who were forbidden from partaking in other professional or educational pursuits a space in which to engage in a creative pursuit that was nevertheless feminised and considered safe. It is important to note, however, that it is not simply that women are *invited* into this space. Rather, women are *chosen* to sing because they are seen as representatives of "art", specifically music (Weidman, 2006). The "naturalness" of music is feminised, making women the ideal bearers not only of this form but of Hindu culture. This form of orality thus bears the weight of a continued and diligently preserved cultural heritage.

Carnatic music is a prominent example of how the speaker's identity influences the way voices are used, heard, and understood. As Weidman argues, a deep consideration of the Carnatic singer as artist belies the notion of the "artist" as a "creative individual in control of his or her medium" (2006, p. 222). As I have noted above, Carnatic music is not allowed to be accessed by all performers, listeners, or people. It is furthermore a form of orality that necessitates a specific type of *gendered performance*. I observe that it is also controlled in that the mark of a "good" Carnatic singer, apart from vocal mastery, is recitation and mimesis. Much like Vedic chanting, the way to be a good Carnatic singer is to *faithfully recreate an intended sound*. Scope for creativity and artistic impression is limited, although contemporary variations of the form have 'remixed' this deeply traditional practice (Hornabrook, 2019) . In this sense, the Carnatic singer offers an important glimpse of the ability of certain forms of orality to be used as discipline. Rather than projection of voice, Amanda Weidman likens women singing Carnatic music to a form of *ventriloquism*. In singing, women are not exercising their ability to speak; as Spivak argues in "Can the Subaltern Speak?", speaking within these confines is a speech-act, rather than a measure of power or agency (Landry et al., 1996). This is a controlled orality; only select women can engage in it, pursue it, or even listen to it. Only upper-caste women can pursue Carnatic music, and once practicing it, the singer engages in a discipline which extends beyond vocal performance. Professional Carnatic singers are expected to dress chastely and present respectably (Weidman, 2006). I argue that the presence of the physical body in oral practice expands the disciplinary project of the medium to include the body. In this way, Carnatic music is both an art form and a mode of projecting an acceptable and

domesticated upper-caste and respectable femininity. Carnatic artists are thus expected to be the bearers of tradition and perform a specific type of chaste, disciplined femininity (Bakrania, 2013). The artist, while allowed some levels of freedom that historically have not been made available to women, is also expected to follow a specific and rigid code that defines success. In Spivak's terms, the singer cannot "speak", and is denied a true emancipatory voice. Indeed, the successful Carnatic song, or "story", only seeks to further embed the artist in her constraints as a perfect mimic.

Orality in this case study is thus not a tool of resistance, but rather a disciplinary practice which asserts the right of a specific group of upper-class men to own and transmit knowledge. Both Carnatic music and Vedic chanting determine success via fidelity to a *specific sound*. Due to the entirely oral form of the Vedas, and the fact that there is no full recording of all the texts, I contend that while devotion is a core component of this form of oral transmission, *fear* is another motivating factor. While the Vedas are recited to praise and remember God, the continued tradition of chanting them and teaching generations of young Brahmin men to recite them in a specific way is also a *fear of loss.* By this I mean not only the loss of the Vedic tradition itself, but also the cultures that Vedic chanting affirms: namely, Brahminical hegemony (Olivelle, 2008). Orality is also an archival form; through Vedic transmission, the past is captured, taught, and transmitted – and heard. In the case of Carnatic music, women are 'given' a voice, but this type of voice lacks agency and creativity. Zhang et al. refer to the "accidental" or "occasional" speech-act of the subaltern[23] as "voicings" (2012, pp. 204–205), rather than true voice. For example, the public performance of a female Carnatic musician may appear to be a deployment of voice, but it is rather a type of *voicing,* or ventriloquism, as Weidman calls it. The artist is performing someone else's voice and words. The speaker is not so much a storyteller as a mimic or a *machine* projecting voice, rather than creating it.

In this sense, I argue, the body functions as a technology in and of itself: an audio speaker, recreating voice, presenting it in different tones and styles, but never changing its content.

[23] The class and caste positionality of Carnatic singers means they are not truly subaltern in this example, however

The body's interweaving with technology predates the existence of digital oral technologies that are discussed later in this chapter.

The analyses I have shown above offer just two examples of Indian orality; one exclusively for Brahmin men, and one largely practiced by upper-caste women. These case studies are separated by millennia but serve to show us the way that the oral form has been traditionally and expressly linked to religion in Hindu culture, as well as the hegemony that Brahminism plays in historic oral forms in India. The exclusiveness of these practices indicates just two of the ways that oral transmission in India has sought to preserve a distinctive culture. Only select groups of people can access this particular form of worship, or oral performance, reflecting that orality can be a mechanism that is restricted and restrictive in its deployment.

Orality as Memory: Stories of Partition

This section focuses on orality as archival tool, demonstrating that orality can be used to retell or *speak back* to history, reanimating lost and unheard voices. I use literature on silence, bearing witness, and orality as memory to consider how telling stories about traumatic events can help to recover lost memories and voices. I focus particularly on the 1947 Archive, a non-profit and non-governmental digital archive that captures and preserves forgotten voices from the Partition of India. The 1947 Partition, and the consequent formation of India and Pakistan as separate states, is known as one of the most traumatic events of South Asian history; yet its brutality and horror is often sanitised in formal historical transmissions, such as textbooks (Butalia, 2018). Historical accounts of partition have often neglected to capture the rupture and personal losses that the Partition wrought, and continues to inflict, on South Asia.

In present day India and Pakistan, descendants of Partition survivors have responded to the growing threat of memories being lost. As many more survivors grow old, pass away, or simply lose access to personal stories of Partition, there has been an urgency to capture stories and histories. Urvashi Butalia is explicit in her work on feminist oral histories of Partition in comparing this process to that of passing down memories of the holocaust. She argues that "it is not only facts of any event that are important, but, equally, how people remember these facts" (2018, p. 24). Butalia's work is an effort to capture oral accounts of Partition by women, and to thus shed light on how Partition is remembered. This feminist approach to understanding Partition through minor characters, anecdotes and minutiae is similarly

espoused by Aanchal Malhotra's work on objects of the Partition (Malhotra, 2019). Focusing on 21 objects carried by refugees over the 1947 borders, Malhotra uses these objects to elicit oral stories and recollections. Her focus, once again, is not on *what happened,* but rather stories that seem broadly to reflect on the domesticities of South Asian womens' experiences before, during, and after the Partition.

Other such unorthodox histories of Partition have abounded in recent years, often focused on capturing the voices of people who were unheard during the events of 1947 and beyond; namely, women, children and members of Scheduled Castes (Irfan, 2021; Puri, 2019; Raychaudhuri, 2019). These projects reflect a modern desire to hear from those who have been historically made voiceless, and to create a fuller impression of history, thus rewriting it – or rather, retelling it. It is amidst this vein that the 1947 Archive was born. The Archive's aims are manifold. Firstly, it aims to document and digitise oral accounts from anyone who lived through the 1947 Partition, and to subsequently turn these accounts into an accessible form. Secondly, it seeks to collect and preserve objects relating to Partition. Finally, it aims to bring the Partition into public consciousness via digital storytelling. Due to the sensitive nature of Partition stories and Hindu-Muslim tensions in South Asia today, these recollections are not publicly available, but will be compiled into a book in order to make these stories accessible – albeit by changing the form of these recordings. However, website users can access a short, textual summary of each story.

The 1947 Partition project offers several interesting examples of orality as a tool to capture memories and to hear stories. Its focus is on what James Young refers to in his work on the Holocaust as *knowing the event the way it was remembered* (1994, p. 32). Oral stories allow us to hear directly from the parties themselves as they narrate their stories in a way both natural and accessible. Like on Voices of Rural India, studied in Chapter 5, there is an emphasis on speaking to interviewees in the language they are comfortable with and allowing vernacular communication. This is especially poignant in reflecting on Partition itself, a rupture which led to the irrevocable change of languages such as Urdu, Hindi, Punjabi and Bengali (N. Sarkar, 2021) . It is not only people, but also *language itself*, that experienced a partition and a splintering, a reformation of identity after 1947. As Jean Hatzfeld's account of Rwandan genocide survivors asserts: "the genocide changed the meaning of certain words in the survivor's language; and it completely lifted the meaning out of other words" (2000, p. 159). Through

traumatic experience, words become insufficient to describe horrors and suffering, and ordinary words – such as "partition" – take on new, painful connotations. Hatzfeld's account of life after genocide also details how survivors speak about their collective trauma in order to "clear away pain". The 1947 Archive has a similar dual function of speaking to remember, as well as speaking to attempt to strip the past of its agony.

The digital archive's multilingualism is also a practical feature which reflects the way that horrors and traumas of Partition were shared by South Asians of multiple backgrounds. This multilingualism is reflected in the map that website users see upon entering the website. A screenshot of this map can be seen in Figures 25 and 26. The interactive map on the platform allows users to see stories from different parts of India and even other Asian countries, showing the wide scope of Partition's impact.

Figure 25 An interactive platform map on the 1947 Archive indicating where stories are available to read/hear from different parts of South Asia – largely India

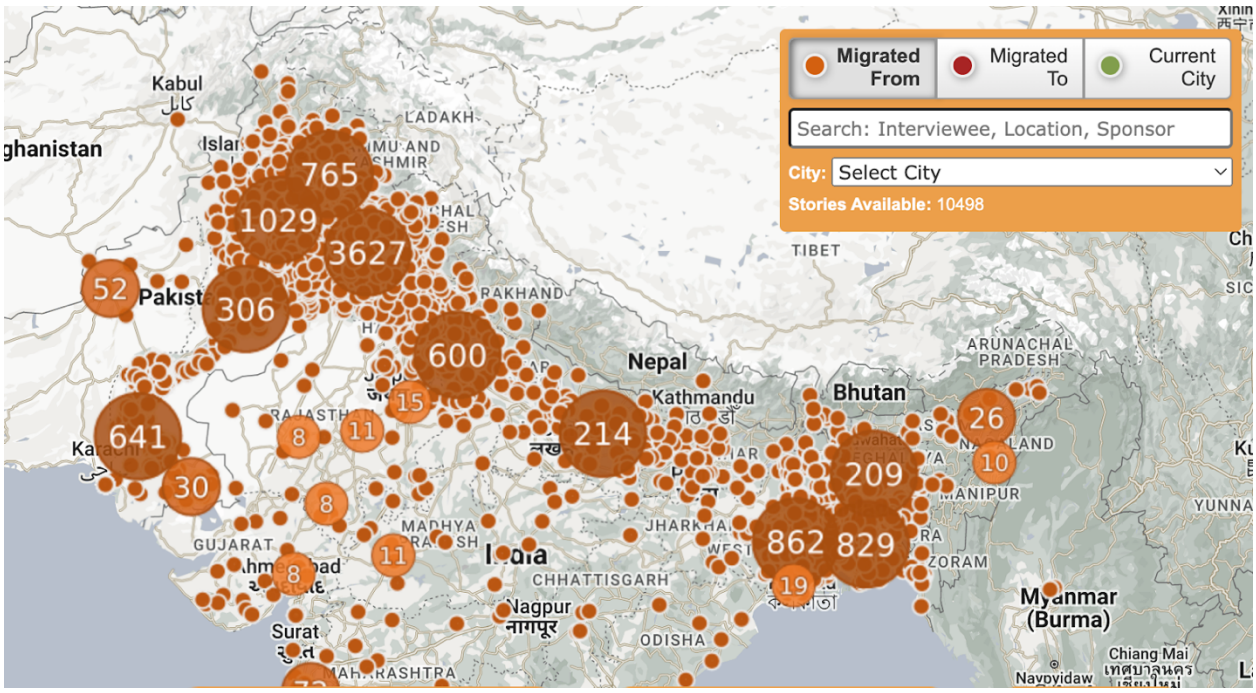

Figure 26 A zoom in on North India, Pakistan, and surrounding countries

The above screenshots indicate a form not only give the user a small indication of how many lives have been touched by the Partition, but also create a separate text for the user to read. The late geographer J.B. Hartley, as well as Denis Wood and John Fels, have written compellingly about considering the map as a text to read as one would "thick literature" (Harley, 2009; D. Wood & Fels, 1986). Maps can be metaphors (Muehrcke & Muehrcke, 1974), demonstrating multiple and specific forms of knowledge, information, and ways of living in the world (Au, 2021; Bosse, 2021). In this case, the map of Partition stories and memories uses community-centred cartography as a practice to build a narrative of otherwise disparate people bound together by the trauma of loss and migration. In an India split by religious tensions and divides between the North and South this map seeks to tell a larger story of people shaped by Partition. In doing so, it negates the boundaries and borders of traditional maps, showing the international impact and flows of Partition stories. As Taiyon J. Coleman writes, maps "show us how to move through and beyond the spaces that keep us from one another" (Coleman, 2017). She argues that poetry, and storytelling more broadly, is a type of map that allows us to "find ourselves" in relation to others. In using this map, the 1947 Archive shows not only stories and where they are located, but also the connections that stories can form in bringing disparate peoples, places, and lives together. It indicates a form of resistance to the increasingly

nationalistic and insular regimes of India and Pakistan, offering an alternative narrative for community-centred storytelling.

The listener's role in receiving oral stories is integral to their delivery and dissemination. Although the 1947 Archive website is not itself oral, it is nevertheless a repository of oral knowledge and stories. Oral storytelling is a challenge to traditional forms of history and recollection about the Partition. In Urvashi Butalia's work, she focuses on the concept of *"recovering voice";* by her own admission, a problematic practice, as she cannot help but place her own voice alongside the voices of the women she interviews (Butalia, 2018). Furthermore, across her interview process, she finds that it is much easier to hear from middle-class women (as she herself is), rather than Dalit women –of the latter, she is only able to find one willing to speak (2018, pp. 280–281). The listener comes from a different place to the speaker: temporally, geographically, personally. Some of these stories have never been heard or asked for before; in archiving them and curating them on a digital platform, the archivist renders permanent and inescapable something painful and traumatic. Speaking can reflect an ephemeral thought; the digital, however, is far more durable.

Additionally, though she knows that there are stories of rape and abduction among the women she interviews, none of these survivors are willing to speak about their experiences. Instead, they want these stories to be relegated to "the realm of amnesia". The act of bearing witness to trauma may mean that survivors later relive suffering in recounting stories – "not relief, but further retraumatization" (Felman & Laub, 1992, p. 67). As Felman and Laub assert, the bearer of testimonies – the listener – is in a privileged position:

> *...there needs to be a bonding, the intimate and total presence of an other – in the position of one who hears... The witnesses are talking to somebody: to somebody they have been waiting for for a long time. (1992, p. 71)*

Butalia reflects that oral stories make silences more tangible and powerful. The role of the listener, as Felman and Laub note, is to understand and respect these silences. Susan Sontag' essay on silence argues, "there is no such thing as empty space. As long as a human eye is looking, there is always something to see. To look at something which is "empty" is still to be looking..." (1969, p. 10). Similarly, there is no such thing as true silence; the oral form conveys the deliberate pausing, the breakdown of language, that creates silent moments. In this way,

orality *gives voice* – power and agency – even to moments without literal voice, spoken words. The role of technology in oral capture is significant in its ability to capture silent moments and moments without speaking, instead recording background noise without speech to reflect a deliberate rather than accidental silence.

The work of the 1947 Archive reflects the possibility of creating space for the subaltern to speak – *retrospectively.* Archives of Partition reflect a belated form of amplifying the stories of marginalised people, and of speaking back to history. Yet is it only in the retrospective that the subaltern is thought of as important and worth listening to? Readers and listeners may be willing to listen to the subaltern of many decades ago, but this same consideration and opportunity is not often granted to the contemporary subaltern figure. This is evidenced in India's current political and social marginalisation of specific communities (or rather, anti-communities, since caste is a divider rather than a unifier), such as Scheduled Castes and Muslims (Biswas, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2007). While the subaltern of the past may be able to speak, is this speaking – and the consequent *hearing* – of their voice of value to them, given that the events they speak of have long passed? Can the subaltern ever speak and be heard contemporaneously, on their own terms, in their own words, on a topic of their own choice? In engaging with an oral archive such as this, the listener and reader must be cognisant too of the many voices that it is *not* possible to hear from. It is estimated that between 1-2 million people died during the Partition; these voices are simply lost. The contemporary speaker faces the pressure of not only telling their own story, but of speaking for millions of unheard voices, thus experiencing the dilemma of speaking for others (Alcoff, 1991) Furthermore, as Bhutalia's writing exemplifies, the subaltern is sidelined even in a modern spotlight; it is still easier and more convenient to hear from middle-class men and women.

Despite these considerations, the 1947 Archive represents a desire to capture the past and to prevent the loss of memories, which is particularly powerful in the context of the historic sanitisation of Partition. Questions of how to speak, listen, and capture stories are important reflexive discussions, much like the decisions a qualitative researcher might make in deciding how to interview her participants. In writing down an oral story, however, these memories do undergo a transformation. An oral memory which was changeable depending on the environment, the mood of the speaker, or the audience's interaction becomes fixed, permanent, and frozen in time when archived digitally. This freezing represents only a snapshot of the

real, living story, and furthermore turns a story that is audience-specific into something that many can access. The nuances of oral storytelling may be flattened or lost. Furthermore, the ultimate transcription of oral stories into written form on the 1947 Archive and many other Partition archives does represent, to some extent, the hierarchy of the story form. Is oral storytelling fated to eventually be captured, frozen, and made permanent via text?

Orality as Memory: Folklore

The freezing of oral tradition and the pausing of time is relevant across other oral archive platforms in India. In my research to find digital storytelling platforms in India, I came across several oral platforms, or platforms with oral components, such as Pocket FM and Kuku FM, which were also mentioned by my research interviewees in Chapter 4. My research into digital platforms also unearthed archives sought to preserve memories, such as Voices of Rural India (VRI).

One platform that stood out because of its mission to preserve the oral tradition in its myriad of forms was LoreKeepers, a website archive funded by ARPO (the Archival and Research Project) in 2021. Its focus is explicitly local to Kerala, one of India's Southern states, and it describes its practice as "digital archiving, multimedia storytelling, research, community engagement and interventions to preserve and promote our pluralistic cultural heritage". LoreKeeper contributors use smartphones to record stories on audio or video, which they then submit to the archive. The website functions as a repository of intangible cultural heritage, which I will write about extensively in Chapter 5.

In many ways, LoreKeepers is similar to VRI, but while the latter is explicitly driven by a desire to cultivate and facilitate tourism to parts of rural India, LoreKeepers is driven by the impetus to archive content and prevent the loss of cultural heritage. To understand more about the archive and its work, I interviewed ARPO and LoreKeeper's executive director and co-founder Sruthin Lal, who oversees much of this young project, and whose words provided an evocative and powerful motivating epigraph for this chapter. Lal, who consented to being named and referenced for this project, was formerly a journalist, and moved back to Kerala in 2021, where LoreKeepers was born. Speaking of the need to capture Keralan stories, music, and folklore, he said to me, "I felt like there's a lot of things to be done...and if you don't do it, things will vanish. The best time to do this was yesterday." The archiving of folklore is used

as a preventative measure against the erosion of culture, specifically *local* or regional culture, which is otherwise often assimilated into a wider national cultural heritage.

LoreKeepers asks volunteers in Kerala – including schoolchildren and teachers – to record older people in their communities (with their consent) singing, speaking, or telling stories from their past. Although around 90% of the submissions are set to music, many of these are in song. LoreKeepers requires that the submissions be "completely folklore...it should not be something you studied in school", according to Sruthin. Yet the lines between myth and memory are often easy to blur, both contemporarily and historically, and Sruthin foresees issues in enforcing this rule as the platform expands.

When I asked him why he had set up LoreKeepers, Sruthin had several reasons, noting that such stories "are vanishing...at least [this way], they will be stored somewhere." He observed, "Technology is blamed for the losing of things like this, so we thought the same technology can be used to preserve them." Lal argued that technology does not have to replace traditional cultural heritage; rather, it can facilitate the preservation of culture. Lal specifically wanted to focus on oral stories because of the importance of oral culture in many Indian families; in communities with limited literacy, oral mythology and storytelling is a crucial part of community cohesion and identity. As a Keralan himself, Lal was aware of the plethora of songs, folklore, and legends that he had heard which had never been archived anywhere. Writing these stories down, would, he argues, "standardise" them, such that local dialects, tunes, or rhythms would be lost. LoreKeepers also features videos for this reason; it is easier to determine lip movements or body language that tends to accompany oral performance, particularly when local dialects may be distinctive.

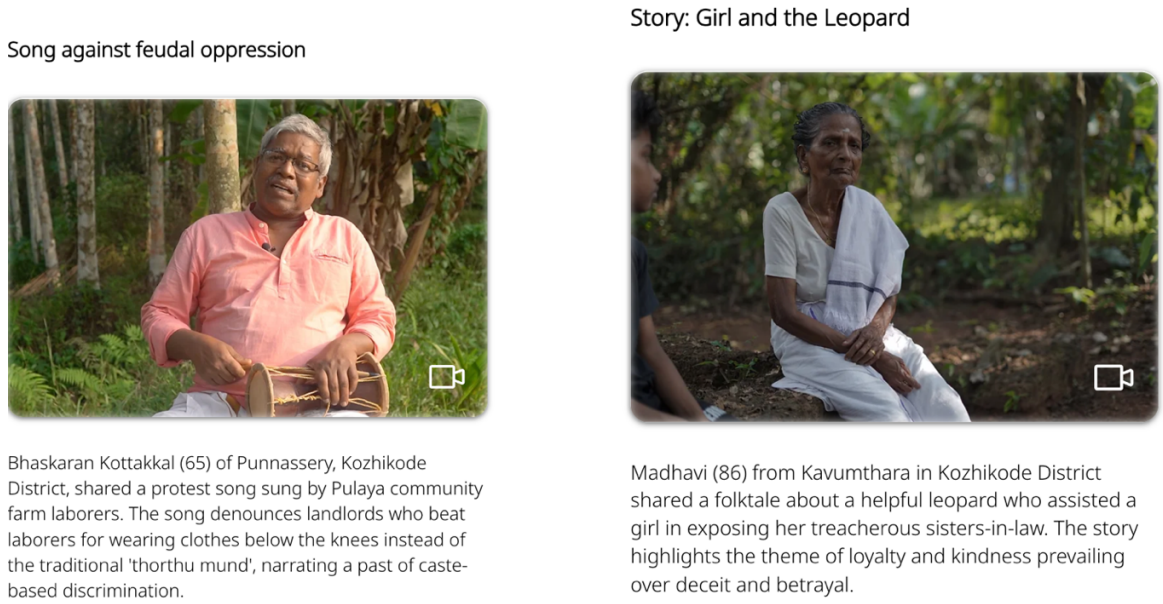

Figure 27 A screenshot from the LoreKeepers website, which summarises the oral recordings in English. Despite the English use on the website, the videos are almost all entirely in Malayalam, the local language of Kerala

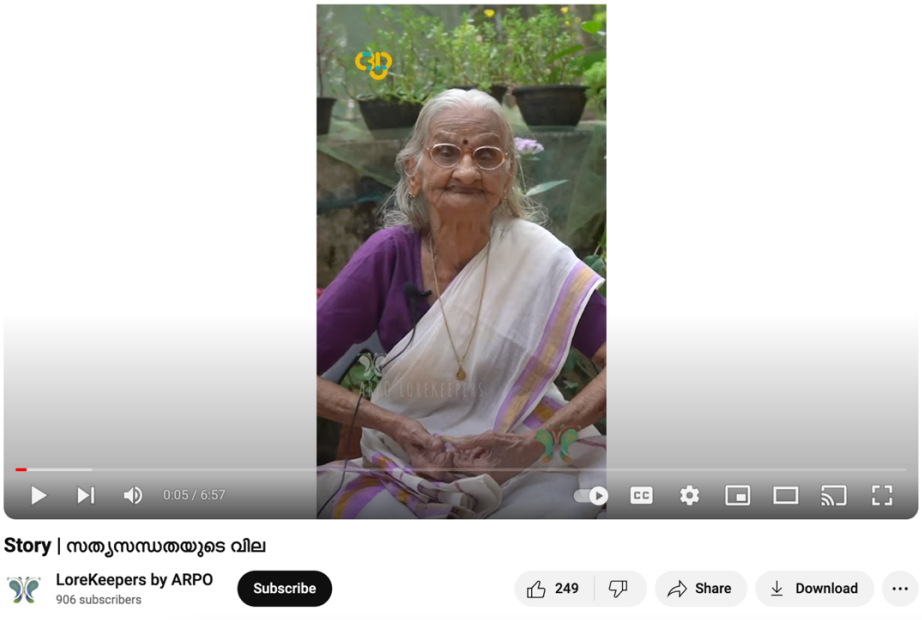

Figure 28 Clicking on a video takes the user to YouTube, where the recordings are hosted.

Figures 27 and 28 depict some of the specificities of the LoreKeepers archive. While the content of the videos is typically in Malayalam, the summaries and website design are in English.

YouTube is used to host the videos due to its convenience and familiarity for many platform users.

Speaking to Sruthin and unpacking the LoreKeepers archive indicated a passion for preserving the past, borne of concern that such a past may inevitably be lost. Most of the speakers in LoreKeeper videos are elderly, passing on stories told in their families or communities for generations; as such, the stories on LoreKeepers stretch back decades, even centuries. Additionally, LoreKeepers functions as a linguistic archive, storing memories of dialects and language patterns, as well as the stories themselves. Having already examined the preservation and sharing of cultural stories on Voices of Rural India in Chapter 5, I will not repeat these points now. Rather, I include LoreKeepers as an example of a burgeoning interest in recreating the past and ensuring its relevance in the present and future, as well as the digital archive as a geographical space, recreating the culture of the region. Sruthin reasoned that an audio-centric platform or website would be convenient to use, because: "I feel we are going back to oral. I would listen to a one hour-long podcast while driving. But I won't read for one hour. Listening culture is coming back."

The concept of going *back to oral* is of great significance to this chapter and is also central to Thomas Pettitt's argument that we are now experiencing the aftermath of the closure of the Gutenberg Parenthesis. Pettitt asserts that after an era of print dominance, oral forms of communication and literature are once again becoming popular and mainstream. Pettitt's work sees print as a brief *parenthesis* in the long history of storytelling (2007, p. 2). Certainly, Sruthin's words echo a shift in leisure habits relating to auditory technology. Sruthin neatly explains a cultural shift in using time; an hour of time is more likely to be spent on one's phone, or listening to music, podcasts, or watching YouTube videos, than it is reading a book. Capturing stories in an oral form is thus not simply an act of freezing the past; it is, according to Sruthin, a form of communication that is gaining popularity in the present.

These stories, histories, myths, and songs across a number of archival websites and platforms reflect a growing interest in retelling the past as well as a reconsideration of what cultural identity means. Technological tools which allow convenient and clear recording and listening have greatly facilitated the process of capture. Furthermore, as many of my interviewees remark in Chapter 4, access to 4G and the omnipresence of smartphones in India have revolutionised the way ordinary people are able to tell stories and hear them. As the example

of LoreKeepers indicates, seemingly quotidian narratives of and in everyday life can be disseminated with groups of people outside the community. Yet these oral captures, no matter how powerful, are undeniably different to the experience of hearing a story from a living person. Oral stories or performances are intimate, personal, and audience specific; they rarely stay the same from performance to performance, and rely on the space and environment they are told in. Oral or video recordings are only a snapshot of the dynamic and ever-changing oral tradition. They are frozen in time – all the better to prevent their loss – but their freezing comes at the cost of the dynamic oral performance. In the case of oral histories, such as Partition stories, this freezing is necessary to encapsulate an event. For oral folklore, however, the recording can only offer a flattened facsimile of a living, breathing tradition.

Yet the fear of losing is powerful incentive to keep building archives and to capture these moments of oral experience. Losing stories means losing culture, and it is often marginalised communities who suffer most from this. Many of the stories on LoreKeepers, and indeed Voices of Rural India, are from Dalit storytellers. Dalits in India are a highly marginalised and oppressed community, and casteism is pervasive in Indian society (Human Rights Watch, 2007; S.J et al., 2014; Viswanath, 2014). On Lorekeepers, around 90% of the 1000 stories are by Dalit community members, reflecting the importance of orality as a tool of resistance by those for whom literacy has been wrested. It is precisely the lack of "standardisation" in oral narratives that allows each story a chance to defy convention and homogeneity, instead suggesting the multiplicity of Dalit experience in Kerala. In placing these stories on an oral archive, LoreKeepers encourages the *sonic discipline* I coin in this chapter. While Dalit citizens are marginalised and their voices unheard in systems of power in India, this archive is one place where users encounter and listen to Dalit stories and experiences. In this way, the archive is not attempting to merely recreate the past, but to improve it. The oral archive can function as a technological imaginary; a deliberate space where marginalised voices are amplified and *literally* heard over the voices of the elite.

When I asked Sruthin why he saw oral storytelling as so important, it was clear these considerations had been part of the fabric of the work of LoreKeepers and the other projects by ARPO. He said, thoughtfully: "If you lose your story..." He paused for a few moments. "You know, whose story wins? Whose story is heard?"

Orality's Present/Presence

Moving from the use of orality to capture or refashion the past, I explore where India's relationship with the oral is today. The framing of this as the present/presence reflects the ubiquity of oral technology and storytelling in contemporary India. From podcasts, to audiobooks, to audio-visual platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, and Spotify, forms of oral storytelling are omnipresent. Unlike the highly structured and disciplined oral forms of Vedic chanting, or the use of the oral to archive history, however, these contemporary technological uses of orality can be considered "textual taxidermy", as John Miles Foley remarks (2005, p. 233): an oral resuscitation of something that was once text. This is especially pertinent with text-to-oral phenomena such as audiobooks, which begin life as written stories before being revived in a new medium. Many of these examples of technology-facilitated orality are not truly "oral", as they depend on the written word to exist.

Yet I draw attention to these oral platforms and phenomena to remind the reader just how very *loud* technology is. I considered my own oral and aural technological presence in writing this chapter, reflecting on the practices that have become so routine in my life. Every day, I listen to music on a major streaming platform; I take my headphones with me wherever I go. I watch short videos across a number of platforms; I call my parents on any number of apps that allow free international calls. Engaging with technology is not a silent affair. Perhaps one of the main ways that I communicate via oral technology, however, is via the use of the voice note.

The voice note, or voice memo, is a built-in feature on apps such as Whatsapp, iMessage, and Signal, to name a few, and is often used as a complement or alternative to texting, allowing users to have an asynchronous phone call with each other. The voice note's recent popularity is such that academic literature on its impact is limited, but business reports and media publications have noticed that the tool is especially popular among "the next billion" – tech users in developing countries such as India (Bellman, 2017). While slightly dated, the *Wall Street Journal* profile on the voice note's usage in India reflects several features which have led to its rise in popularity. Firstly, voice notes can be used by people with low levels of text literacy, which means that they are invaluable for people across India's social stratosphere, many of are not fully literate (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2023). Secondly, voice notes

are convenient for people 'on the go', which makes them especially accessible for people with jobs that require them to be mobile, such as taxi drivers, or delivery workers. Finally, and of particular significance to non-Western countries, voice notes allow multilingual, and even non-verbal, communication. While textual forms of communication on platforms such as WhatsApp force users to use monolingual, often English, text, voice notes are a way of collapsing this. In regions where the written language is more complicated than a Latin keyboard (Elliott & Phorn, 2021) allows, voice notes allow a helpful solution, while also offering an intimate aural experience. For bilingual or multilingual users, it is easy to move between languages on a voice note, or to simply record sounds, reactions, or music. Voice notes can thus function not only as a form of direct communication, but also as peer-to-peer entertainment, like a private podcast. The voice note as a symbol of platform-based oral interaction could represent the ushering in of a "new phase" of technological communication, and similarly a return to an oral culture.

While the voice note is popular worldwide, it is difficult to make forecasts on longevity. Certainly, however, the rise of audio-visual platforms and content suggest users' desires to move beyond the textual Internet and towards more multifaceted digital experiences. In India, two popular storytelling platforms are Pocket FM and Kuku FM, which create audio series, audiobooks, and platforms. Kuku FM boasts over 30 million listeners; Pocket FM has 130 million. These numbers serve as a testament to India's long history of orality and its desire for home-grown storytelling content, which this thesis focuses on. Not only do Indians want Indian stories, but just as importantly, they want to *hear Indian voices.* Voice here reflects familiarity and closeness, but also a sense of being part of the same community. Both Kuku FM and Pocket FM have – like many of the apps, platforms, and websites in this thesis – multilingual regional Indian content, such that users can seek out local stories as well as large-scale national narratives. Although middle-class Indian users in metropolitan cities still have the option to use global apps such as Audible, the Amazon-owned podcast platform, this thesis has examined the ways that local stories and small-scale creative platforms are appealing to Indian readers and storytellers.

So novel are these entrants to the world of orality, and so potentially ephemeral in the longer history of the form, that no researcher can with certainty attest to their future. Yet echoes of previous oral forms are present. While voice notes are used to communicate rather than to

archive, users are participating in a process of everyday archiving, the storage and capture of memories and voices. The intimacy of this exchange is perhaps belied by the privacy practices of large tech platforms, wherein users do indeed become hosts to large swathes of data belonging to other people (Keenan, 2014). Whether or not users have chosen it, or are even aware of it, the recipient of a voice note is an archivist building a record of another person. That these records belong to the companies which create and maintain these technologies is a recognition of the powerlessness of voicing under such colonialist and capitalist systems (Landry et al., 1996; Zuboff, 2019). Such considerations of privacy and data ownership, however, are regretfully beyond the scope of this work.

Voice notes, audio platforms, and a rise in audio-visual storytelling do not automatically tell us that the subaltern can speak. Rather they indicate how noisy the landscape of technological communication is now. Numerous ventriloquisms, speech-acts, and voicings – whatever one's chosen terminology is – are at work. Power imbalances and inequalities are still present on tech platforms, as has been well-documented and explored (Benjamin, 2019; Nakamura, 2002, 2014a). That said, the growth of fast Internet access and cheaper smartphone accessibility in India has opened doors to a wider participation of Indian citizens in large global platforms. There may be more ways to make *sounds* than ever before, but these do not necessarily result in speaking or being listened to. Without interpretation and agency, is this creative sound creation simply echo?

Conclusion

Where Does Orality Go From Here?

Compared to the relatively silent Internet experiences of the 90s and 2000s, we are experiencing an unusually loud moment in oral technology. We hear people's voices every day, and we also regularly contribute to the store of voice-based content and stories. Yet the influence of the oral extends beyond just voice. The *oralisation* of text on the Internet also offers a significant way that the spoken word is influencing oral communications, suggesting what Naomi Baron first posited as an in-between language that exists between orality and literacy (Baron, 1984). Cutler et al. argue that communication on online platforms is now more oral than textual, despite its form; text slang and colloquialisms are influenced by the cadences of speech, rather than of writing (2022). Orality is thus a means of structuring thought, and one that is heavily

influencing digital communication. The vernacularisation of language and writing on digital platforms (Georgakopoulou & Spilioti, 2015) suggests a future amalgamation of literacy and orality that ultimately creates a new language, and a new *mode of being* on digital platforms.

That more people are using this new language is clear, if we are to take the increasing volume of smartphone, platform, and Internet users – the "next billion users" (Arora, 2019) – as evidence. Yet more users does not necessarily equate hearing, or listening, to a wider range of voices; such *sonic discipline* cannot occur without a greater consideration of the contexts and environments from which people speak. Walter J Ong speaks almost wistfully of the warm intimacy of orality as a counterpoint to the cool distance of literacy (2003, p. 10); however, as this chapter has explored, orality and silence can also be disciplinary tools. We have access to some archives of sound and oral stories; what we lack is archives of silence, the necessary contrast to voice.

Earlier in this chapter, I remarked that orality is resistant. Certainly, it is resistant to being defined or categorised. Yet the defiant, ebullient, and relentless desire to speak repeats itself through many vast swathes of Indian culture, in spite of limited contexts and avenues to be heard. Whatever else the future of orality may hold, this urge to speak nevertheless will continue its long echo.

Chapter 7. Conclusion

The Messenger

Of all the stories my grandmother has told me over the years, this one is my favourite, because it is true. When my grandmother was a child, she lived in a small village in Tamil Nadu in India. Her father was a lawyer in Nagapattinam, the local town. Unusually for the time (and even now), my Hindu great-grandfather had many Muslim clients; specifically, Muslim women from Nagore, a pilgrimage spot nearby. He represented these clients; perhaps they wanted a divorce, or had questions about the family property, and needed to speak to a lawyer. There was a catch, however. He could not meet with them in person, because they were observant Muslim women who would not meet directly with a man outside their family. So this is what they arranged. My great-grandfather would pass on a message through his only daughter, my grandmother, who would run out into the village and tell the woman in question. They would send her back with another message, and so on, and so on; she would run back and forth with memos, questions, and bulletins all through the heat of the day. They would talk like this, through the figure of a little girl (she must have been a child, perhaps eight years old) trying to remember complicated legal messages and testimonies and deliver them faithfully.

In writing this thesis, I have spent a great deal of time hearing stories, parsing stories, and reflecting on stories. In Chapter 1, I referred to myself as a storyteller, pulling threads together to form a cohesive narrative. I look now to the story above, and see myself instead as the messenger, carrying and delivering stories from person to person. We tell stories to entertain ourselves and each other, to pass the time, and to communicate with other people; to send a message across a chasm. This last chapter is the final message of this work. In this conclusion to my thesis, I reflect on these stories, summarising my findings thematically and considering future directions for this research. I argue for the need for scholars and media practitioners alike to work to create more digital spaces that enable storytelling in India, and to embrace the polyvocality this may deliver.

Summary

These days, of course, there would be no messenger; or rather, the messenger would not be human. Even in India's villages, Internet access, the omnipresence of smartphones, and the cheapness of data plans means that few are completely unable to access digital platforms. Platforms and technological solutions have perhaps limited the need to send a child running across the village to talk to someone. The context of India's tech revolution, as well as the "Make in India" and "Digital India" (Choudhury, 2014) movements which have driven innovation in the country, are integral in setting the scene for this thesis, and the inclusion of rural archives in this work, particularly in Chapter 5, would not have been possible a decade ago. This immense speed of change should give us pause, as much as it may be highly welcomed in India. The small-scale construct of digital storytelling platforms at present is unlikely to remain so forever. The speed which has been so much a feature of the modern Internet is likely, too, to transfigure the very spaces that this thesis has been concentrated on. Much like the work of the digital archives I explore in Chapters 5 and 6, this project has been an effort to freeze and capture a cultural moment which may be at the cusp of further change.

Each chapter of this project has been relatively autonomous, contemplating different examples and definitions of "digital storytelling", thus reflecting the amorphousness and polyphony of the topic. As I have argued repeatedly throughout this thesis, there is no *one* definition of digital storytelling, and no one storyteller, platform, mode, or text that can be said to represent it. In my work, I have chosen to focus specifically on largely text-centric, fictional stories on Indian-made platforms. However, numerous forms of India's storytelling heritage and future are available online, whether because they have been captured and uploaded digitally or because they are born-digital. There is a difference between these two modes; between the stories on Pratilipi, a platform I explore in Chapter 4, and many of the stories on Voices of Rural India in Chapter 5. The former stories are reliant on the medium of the platform to be conveyed. Their existence is targeted at a modern Indian user who moves between various forms of digital media, be it YouTube, Netflix, or Instagram. They are thus appropriately "snackable"', in the words of one interviewee: short-form textual content which complements the digital offerings of major technology platforms.

The stories on Voices of Rural India, and some of the platforms explored in Chapter 6, are old tales, folklore that has travelled over decades, even centuries, to finally find a home on a digital

archive. The conversion of these stories into a digital form is a form of preservation. Digital archives ensure that these pieces of history are read by new audiences, but also are kept safe against the amnesia of time or the perceived indifference of youth towards traditional ways of living. This confidence in the digital archive to endure even while physical environments are stripped away indicates how deeply technology is integrated into the lives of even elderly, rural Indians, to the extent that there is trust in putting one's story online. That digital archives may not be the final home of this folklore, and that there are potential post-digital story futures waiting to be born, will be valuable considerations for updates to this work in the future.

Both types of digital storytelling are distinctive: they are built for different audiences and used in different ways. Yet at their core, both types of stories are united by a desire to *speak*, to be *heard*, and to communicate with others. Chapter 6 explores in detail the ways in which the postcolonial subject speaks and is constrained in doing so across a long period of Indian history. These various forms of limited and exclusive orality may be taken as an indication of the impossibility of postcolonial, and specifically subaltern, speech. Yet as Radhika Gajjala argues in the introduction to the edited volume *South Asian Digital Humanities* (2020), Spivak's famous question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" should not be deployed in limited, tokenised ways, or to entirely quash possibilities of voice (2020, p. 21). Spivak herself, in a contemporary interview, has described herself as now being "more interested in groups and classes rather than single people" (R. K. Gairola, personal communication, 8 January 2012). Community liberation should be at the heart of creating spaces for the subaltern to speak. Certainly, this aim does define much of the work in the archives I discuss in Chapters 5 and 6, even where it may be complicated by other financial or commercial interests, as on Voices of Rural India. It is both thus realistic and indeed imperative to hope for and work towards more digital and physical spaces where people can speak, write, and tell stories. Digital storytelling as a means for people to *enjoy themselves* is a crucial right that, as Payal Arora writes, is often wrested from people in the Global South (2019, p. 3).

This thesis *types back* to several key debates which are engaged with in Chapter 2; around storytelling as a concept, the power of voices in digital creative spaces, and India as the central node that provides a backdrop for these themes to interact with each other. In this work's exploration of digital storytelling, I have examined the ways that online storytelling spaces

seek to intermingle with cultures and platforms that are distinctive from literary traditions. Pratilipi, for example, is a product that proudly draws from social media apps in its design and content. While reading and writing are key features of the websites in this thesis, platforms like Pratilipi, Voices of Rural India, and LoreKeepers do not seek to replace books. Rather, they use the increasingly dependent relationship Indians have with social media to build new spaces of preservation, engagement, and fun online. Specifically, these platforms leverage the enthusiasm of the amateur for using digital tools, particularly smartphones, to contribute to digital forums that allow them an opportunity to *be heard.* These spaces do shape the act of storytelling in their short form, easily accessible, and often low-brow creations. So, too, do digital archives genuinely provide ways for ordinary Indian Internet users to easily *type back* to a historical canon, as in the case of the 1947 Archive spotlighted in Chapter 6. Yet no technological invention or culture can truly eradicate the systems of oppression which silence many Indian communities. It will take more than a few digital platforms to challenge the dominant voices we hear and read in Indian society, particularly if these platforms are small and localised. Furthermore, the ties that some of these platforms have to industrial partners – namely, VRI's links with the tourism industry – may challenge or threaten the archive's goal to hear from rural storytellers in their original language. We still only hear from marginalised Indians in certain contexts and about certain topics. However, in considering the significance of nationalism in this work, it is evident that such digital platforms can act as quiet pockets of resistance in an India so dominated by upper-caste Hindu perspectives. While many of the stories explored in this thesis are notionally apolitical, they nevertheless challenge notions of what dominant society expects rural, poor, or Dalit storytellers to do with Internet access. Payal Arora argues this point clearly, observing that activities like storytelling do not "fit the picture of what development agencies believe the poor should do with the Internet" (2019, p. 5). The idea of using the Internet to tell community folklore about talking animals, as shown in Figure 27, may seem trivial even to Indian audiences. Yet these platforms nevertheless carve out space for users to explore that which seems important to them, and those stories they wish to communicate or simply remember. Within the confines of these platforms, the resistance of literary and even digital norms is underway. Though these might be small acts of resistance, they do nevertheless demonstrate the way the Internet can offer users the chance to make and remake alternative worlds where they might speak and be heard.

Key Themes

One central thesis question has animated and driven this work: What makes technology-facilitated storytelling in India important? Along the way, I have also explored specific research questions in sharp focus, which are specified below. As each chapter has its own individual conclusion and discussion, these questions are best responded to within the body of this work, but this chapter weaves together the key themes of this work, asserting the main findings of this project and indicating future directions that will be fruitful to explore.

Research questions

1. How do users of Indian digital storytelling platforms use these spaces to tell stories and communicate ideas?
2. Why do these Indian users use digital storytelling platforms?
3. What affordances or contexts of these digital storytelling platforms shape storytelling by Indian users?

Thesis question: What makes technology-facilitated storytelling in India important?

Community via Digital Storytelling

One of the fundamental focuses and findings of this thesis is the indispensable role that community plays in digital storytelling. In Chapter 4, the digital storytelling platform Pratilipi is a conduit for reading, but also for engaging with other users. The user interface of Pratilipi is designed such that users can interact with the writers of their favourite stories and befriend others on the platform. In this way, it mimics many popular social media platforms which facilitate communication between users. The descriptions from many of the interviewees I spoke to confirmed that the app is not just a digital reading tool. Rather, it connects writers to their readers, encouraging immediate and responsive interaction. Without this community creation and socialisation, Pratilipi becomes something of a *device,* akin more to Amazon's Kindle than a platform.

In Chapter 5, Voices of Rural India is central to discussions of community and digital storytelling. VRI's digital archive is written *for* and *by* communities, and the folklore on the website bring to life some of the physical aspects of communities they describe. Its visual features and voice recordings also create a sense of community as *place.* Indeed, it is the

environment that is largely the focus of the stories on VRI. This community-centric approach to the archive reflects the pride of its storytellers in speaking of their villages, but also suggests a fear that these places will cease to exist, and that these stories will have no physical space to dwell in any longer. The anxiety of change is paired with a hope that digital platforms can save communities and, contradictorily, that tourism, too, can preserve these rural spaces. Community is positive and joyful on VRI, but there is nevertheless tension in the prioritisation of the community over the individual, as explored in the chapter. In an interview with archive founder Mallika Virdi, she complained about the feelings that community youth in the village of Munsiyari had about posting online:

> *I do feel very strongly that, you know, it's bad enough that we're losing community and contact and real interactions, but now everyone imagines that they're becoming celebrities, they can post about themselves...it's self-advertisement to the extreme. It's just about you as an individual...And I feel that that's the big pity...It's important for people to place themselves within a larger social, geographical, political context and then tell their stories. If stories [on VRI] are not rooted in their reality, then it's like any other story.*

The diktat to post about the community prevents rural storytellers from using the archive to talk about themselves, or to reflect on their lives as individuals, rather than community members. Mallika was concerned about young people losing touch with their community roots and saw the idea of self-advertisement on digital platforms as a negative intrusion onto the traditions that rural communities were striving to hold onto. I did not manage to speak to the Munsiyari youth of whom she was critical, but I could not help but feel that this indictment of individual stories would be directly counter-intuitive to many of their own relationships with social media. As is explored comprehensively by authors such as Payal Arora and Daniel Miller et al., social media is used across India (and the Global South more broadly) for leisure, romantic opportunities, and simply to have fun (Arora, 2019; Miller et al., 2016). The right to be selfish, to use stories to write about oneself without thinking about the community, is as vitally important as community preservation. In the absence of this right to individualism, storytellers are limited in how they can communicate, as I will explore later in this thematic analysis.

In Chapter 6, the 1947 Archive and LoreKeepers seek to spotlight communities which have been historically underrepresented. The 1947 Archive represents numerous survivors of the

Partition of India who are part of a community that they themselves have perhaps been unaware of, or not interacted with. The pins on the map depicted in the chapter represents the physical depiction of a community that spans across South Asia. Community-building is thus the explicit aim of the archive, and its efforts are a form of resistance against historical records and contemporary efforts to silence the voices of these storytellers.

As this chapter has engaged in digital ethnographic methods, including interviews, it is unsurprising that a community focus has emerged as a result of this methodology. However, it is important to emphasise the pairing of community with storytelling. All storytellers hope to reach an audience and to be heard. Digital platforms can make these audiences visible, allowing communication between readers and writers. As Burgess & Green write about YouTube, "[the platform] works not only as a content delivery platform, but also as a social media platform" (2018, p. 94). Digital tools are at work in other online literary spheres, too. BookTok, for example, thrives on and creates communities of readers, particularly young women (Barnett, 2023; Flood, 2021).The BookTok phenomenon reflects the way reading can be interwoven with other activities on social media; making videos, messaging others, and filming 'content'. In the absence of TikTok, a platform that is banned in India, offerings like Pratilipi fulfil a niche to build a community of readers and writers. The cultivation of and desire for online communities indicates how valuable these platforms are for young Internet users in India, and how *digital* communities are as real and present as *physical* manifestations of these spaces for older Indians.

Platform Power

Interactions between users, access to content, algorithmic recommendations; all these features and dynamics are facilitated and ultimately controlled by platforms (Burgess, 2021b). The role of platforms in shaping user content is insidious and often invisibilised; Burgess writes that the personalised experience of platform usage means it is difficult to achieve a shared or collective understanding of how they operate. Furthermore, and most significantly, the relationship that writers have with digital storytelling platforms to sell work, and thus make money, means that this is a relationship highly dependent on the continued existence of the platform itself. One interviewee, Ajay, who works in Pratilipi's product division, remarked on the financial gains some writers were seeing from their content: "People have paid for their

first two-wheeler[24], or their daughter's tuition fees, or [her] wedding, from their earnings on the platform." For some writers, therefore, digital storytelling is more than just a hobby: it is a considerable source of income, and one dictated by platform logics and dynamics. The ability to understand what 'sells' on the platform and what users want is far more significant than simply writing so-called good fiction (Indeed, as I explore in Chapter 4, it is quite often *bad writing,* or trashy fiction, that is popular on amateur writing platforms such as Pratilipi). The dependence that writers have on Pratilipi can turn at any moment; platforms retain the power to change pricing, limit access, or simply, as in the case of the Juggernaut app, remove themselves altogether. Pratilipi's future as a potential "IP ecosystem", an all-in-one media powerhouse where users can write stories and have them adapted on one platform gesture to a new future for the app. During my interview with Rosie, a single mother turned digital story-writer, she told me enthusiastically, "Pratilipi is like a family for me. It has given meaning to my life." The close relationship storytellers have with the platforms that offer them work obscures the fact that these apps have the power to make or break their careers. As Pratilipi enters a new stage of platform growth, will these relationships be forced to change permanently?

Although the platforms discussed in Chapters 5 and 6 are small, they nevertheless do create norms around the type of stories that users share. For example, Voices of Rural India only accepts and promotes work that can relate to the community, rather than the individual. As VRI's work is funded and partially motivated by tourist organisations, the stories on the platform tend to idealise rural spaces; this, too, is a platform norm, shaped by forces outside the users' control.

This thesis has deliberately focused exclusively on Indian-made platforms which are locally built, rather than offshoots of global tech companies or apps. In doing so, I have sought to centre the dynamics of Indian platform users. It is crucial to spotlight the voices of platform users in writing about platform dynamics; only through personal stories about platform experiences can researchers understand how these spaces function for the communities they are built for.

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[24] Indian term for a motorcycle or scooter.

Amateur Creators and Everyday Storytellers

A central theme of this thesis has been about the way that digital storytelling platforms create a space for amateur writers to tell stories. Jean Burgess explores the way that digital storytelling is a form of "vernacular creativity", a cultural practice emerging from "non-elite social contexts and communicative conventions" (2006, p. 206). While my project uses a different definition of digital storytelling to that found in Burgess' work, I have nevertheless centred my focus on spaces of *vernacular creativity*; that is, stories by ordinary Indian writers – or in many cases, stories by specifically marginalised writers. Chapter 4 examines the way that the amateur storytelling platform Pratilipi is shaping reading habits in India. Indian writing is often associated with elite Indian writers in English, who write novels for a largely diasporic or Western population, as Prakruti Maniar explores when she Googles "Indian writers" (Maniar, 2022). Platforms like Pratilipi aim to make the writing and publishing more accessible, thus demystifying the process of commercial storytelling. The ability to type on one's phone and to share content immediately has the potential to change Indian reading and writing habits. In Chapter 5 and 6, I focus on writers from marginalised backgrounds who are telling stories for the first time. These are amateur writers but also relatively new Internet users who are guided by the platforms' editors and volunteers in telling stories – thus indicating the significant role that platforms, and the people who work for them, play in shaping content. Improved access to specific tools and platforms plays an important part in ensuring that storytellers from non-elite backgrounds can participate in the creative economy and enjoy creative leisure time.

Although it is important to look hopefully towards the future of democratised digital storytelling in India, it is important to refrain from placing too much hope on specific platforms to transform the role of the artist or the storyteller. The so-called democratisation of technologies converges with "emerging neoliberal business and economic models" (Burgess, 2006, p. 202). That is, it is profitable to connect populations with access to platforms that allow them to create cheaply. The role of these platforms in creating opportunities for amateurs is not unique to storytelling. Amateur culture is indeed a hallmark of digital platforms, from Instagram, to YouTube, to OnlyFans and the aesthetic of amateur pornographic content as desirable (Paasonen, 2010). In supporting new platforms that spotlight amateur storytellers, it is crucial to be aware of the business models that frame these interactions. Furthermore, as

this thesis has consistently reminded the reader, these platforms are not mainstream, and do not seek to replace literary print culture, or *the book* writ large. This is especially true of digital archives and recorded folklore. In this sense, while digital storytelling platforms democratise or make accessible *certain aspects* of storytelling, I am cautious not to make overly optimistic and unrealistic pronouncements on the power of technology to change literature as a whole.

While some spaces, like Voices of Rural India and LoreKeepers, are specifically created for marginalised writers, platforms such as Pratilipi are theoretically for everyone. The non-elite writer can thus be an elusive concept. My interviewee Rosie, a writer on Pratilipi, explained the appeal of the platform to her, saying, "Many people, commoners like us are writing. They are girl next door types...companies like [Pratilipi] are creating more space for people like us."

I was intrigued by Rosie's use of the phrase "us" in this quote. In many respects, I am very much a privileged Indian writer. I live in the UK and write from within the Western academy, at the University of Oxford, an institution known for its elitism. These facts were well known to my interviewees. At the time of our conversation, I did not notice Rosie's use of this pronoun. When transcribing the interviews, however, I questioned it: was she simply trying to include me in this vision of Pratilipi? Or is it that the concept of *non-elite* is so difficult to recognise in reality that it is challenging to create spaces for ordinary amateur writers? I suspect both of these things are true and that platforms created for everyone to use will be populated and patronised by relatively privileged writers looking for new forums to advertise their work, instead of for new writers to find creative outlets.

Voices in Context

Relatedly, this thesis, and particularly Chapter 6, has examined the way Indian storytellers can speak, be heard, and tell stories. There are numerous oral modes of storytelling across millennia in India, from religious chanting and transmission to a contemporary renewed interest in preserving the past through oral memories. In Chapter 6, I explore the concept of voicings (Zhang et al., 2012) or ventriloquism (Weidman, 2006) in considering projections of Indian voice. These theories contend that while Indian storytellers, especially those from marginalised backgrounds, are able to speak in certain contexts, these are not true expressions of voice. It is only in certain, limited, and arguably not mainstream contexts that we are willing to listen to Dalit voices, or the voices of Muslim women. Even the 1947 Archive, which does

the admirable work of collecting stories from those who survived the Partition, can only give us a retrospective glimpse at the subaltern. What of subalternity today? Can the voices of the marginalised be heard in the mainstream?

Chapter 6 also examines other examples of voice in India, such as Carnatic music performance, arguing that voice is not available to everyone. Furthermore, vocal performance or storytelling through song requires a gendered performance of its singers in this context, as well as a fidelity to a specific sound. As listeners, we thus hear what we expect to hear. This chapter argues for *sonic discipline* in listening to postcolonial and particularly subaltern voices and forms of storytelling: a desire to hear non-Western forms of speaking and being, and to not use vocal performance as a disciplining technology. This goal is ambitious. It is not only the impact of English on Indian voices which limits what voices can be heard, though this is significant. India's own attitude towards minority voices means that these stories are rarely told in the mainstream. In the Indian film industry, for example, there is a tight leash on the types of stories made, and narratives that are seen to be anti-Hindu in any way are often removed from production (Subramanian, 2022) The prioritisation of certain voices in India has arguably never been so evident.

In light of this, I have focused this thesis on alternative spaces for voice, storytelling, and creativity. These are not perfect spaces, as I have covered extensively, nor are they permanent fixtures. Without an eager audience, a steady stream of volunteer efforts, or reliable funding, these platforms, too, may close their missions. I have included the work of these platforms and archives to argue how critical it is that these spaces exist, particularly in an India where the hope of hearing these voices in mainstream forms of storytelling feels distant. The aim of my work is not to reflect on the ways that small archives such as LoreKeepers provide imperfect access to stories and voice, but rather to argue that only with a plethora of digital archives and tools can we hope to hear from more Indian storytellers, not simply outside but *against* the mainstream and that which it signifies.

Towards a Postcolonial Digital Archive

In light of this, the impetus to build postcolonial digital archives is highly relevant and necessary. For many practitioners, digital humanities "is about building things" (Ramsay, 2013), and the relationship between theory and praxis in this sphere is critical. Roopika

Risam's work has been instructive in considering what the promise of postcolonial digital humanities can be, and the long road that is needed to even attempt a *decolonial* digital archive. As she argues, digital archives can be prematurely praised for contributing to decolonisation (2019, p. 47). The imperial archive tells the story of British colonialism from the perspective of the coloniser to modern audiences. Colonial knowledge production of the time also, as Suvir Kaul writes, created a "world-picture" of British power, excluding indigenous voices completely and thus creating large gaps in history (2009, p. 8). The concept of the archive as a story of narrative *success* is one that continues to this day. In Chapter 6, I begin by considering a particularly poignant quote from Sruthin, the founder of oral archive LoreKeepers: "If you lose your story... you know, whose story wins? Whose story is heard?" Is it the fear of the colonial archive forever shaping Indian history that so animates these questions? The British colonial archive as the arbiter of Indian knowledge creates a dynamic that defines winners and losers, successes, and failures in relation to history. The postcolonial digital archive aims to directly counter this. Archives such as the 1947 Archive speak back to history, countering, correcting, and resisting textual narratives of the Partition. Archivists ensure they speak to a range of participants from different backgrounds and nationalities. Thus, the aim of this postcolonial digital archive, along with other types of archives such as LoreKeepers and Voices of Rural India, is to record and disseminate a polyphony of voices. There is no one narrative of postcolonial experience, and only by allowing as many people to speak as possible can the imperial archive be subverted. Yet, as Risam asserts, there is more work to be done before the *decolonial* digital archive can be achieved; archives that actively resist reinscribing the violence of the colonial world-picture and reproducing colonial discourse. The contextualisation of voice, and the prioritisation of postcolonial voices only when discussing specific things, exemplifies this. bell hooks eloquently frames this in her work on marginality: "No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain" (1989, p. 22). Is it only in the context of violent memories or trauma that we are willing to listen to colonial subjects? In focusing on storytelling as a form of leisure in this thesis, I have sought to change this, examining moments of play and joy in digital spaces as well as archives that speak back to the colonial record.

Postcolonial digital archives may focus on the past, but so too do they seek to build new futures. As the creator of the Early Caribbean Digital Archive, states: "we have the opportunity to distribute [the] future more evenly. We have the opportunity to distribute knowledge more

fairly, and in greater forms" (Sample, 2011). Mark Sample directly contradicts the sentiment that digital humanities is about building, arguing instead that it is about *sharing*. The even distribution of knowledge centres the collaborative, community-driven future of the digital archive. As digital methods of finding knowledge – and indeed of hearing, reading, or writing stories– are increasingly the norm, the postcolonial digital archive must be accessible for these future readers. Thus, these digital spaces cannot remain the haunt of only committed scholars. Digital archives, and the stories they contain, have the great potential to challenge existing dominant narratives about the Global South, to produce localised knowledge, to hear from multiple, historically silenced voices, and to potentially contribute to the decolonisation of historic and literary records. This is a lofty ambition. Yet as this thesis has demonstrated, digital spaces in India are already some ways down this road towards the future. New worlds are not only possible, but in front of us already.

Future Considerations and Directions

One of the primary ways that this work can be extended is in considering platforms and archives in South Asia that do *not* write in English. Anglophone literary spaces and digital archives are all too common, yet there is a great diversity of localised knowledge to be read in India's many regional languages. In seeking these platforms, future researchers will likely find more spaces of marginalised resistance and storytelling. The digital platform Dalit Story, for example, is one that spotlights Dalit stories, histories, and voices in Nepal. While this thesis has woven identity through as a considerqation in archival and storytelling processes, there is a great need for research about Indian storytelling that specifically tells stories of and by non-Hindu, non-Savarna[25] storytellers. As identity in modern India becomes ever more important and, in many cases, ever more under threat, it is vitally important to continue researching and preserving stories from marginalised communities.

I am considerably interested in how platforms like Pratilipi will change in the future. When I asked this question of my interviewees, a few editors told me that they were trying to use generative AI – specifically, Chat GPT – as a tool to create prompts for writers with writer's block. So new is the advent of Chat GPT worldwide, and so limited is literature about its

[25] Upper-caste.

usage in India, that this thesis does not dwell on how generative AI will shape digital storytelling. Yet there are inevitable implications for creative technologies and production as a whole; not merely in India, but across the world. Across other forms of media, writer's guilds and unions in LA, for example, have made clear their stance on the use of generative AI to replace human screenwriters and authors, indicating the threats AI may pose to storytellers across mediums (Writer's Guild of America West, 2024). In India, though this generative AI future may be distant, it is worth considering how this tool will affect notions of "Indian-made", human stories, and the practice of the artist or the storyteller in this new landscape.

This thesis has focused on a specific definition of storytelling as something text-based and literary. There are countless other forms of digital storytelling in India that should be explored. The role of streaming platforms in India, and the ways they are stymied in producing narratives, is of particular interest. OTT platforms such as Netflix and Hotstar have taken the country by storm, but so too are they subject to creative restriction by the Indian government. These media services are less "bottom-up" (Burgess, 2006) than those I have explored in this thesis, but as platforms such as Pratilipi seek to become all-in-one "IP ecosystems", it is certain that issues of digital adaptation in India will become increasingly relevant to storytelling spaces.

Conclusion

I end with a question that is, if not unanswerable, at least perennially asked. What impact will digital literary spheres and spaces have on literary cultures as a whole in India? As I have argued, digital platforms like Pratilipi do not overtly seek to replace print books as much as they look to complement media platforms such as YouTube or Instagram. Yet the Internet has already impacted creative practice and indeed all forms of modern life in countless ways. Anna Kornbluh's examination of immediacy as the defining characteristic of 21st century cultural production – from art to politics – considers, amongst other things, the way the digital has facilitated a culture of urgency (2024, p. 18). The collapse of time under digital capitalism has an impact on publishing, reading, and writing; simply put, everything must speed up. In a world of haste and of doing things simultaneously – listening to an audiobook while cooking, reading a book and checking one's phone surreptitiously – digital storytelling platforms slot in neatly. To read quickly, interpret immediately, and rapidly deliver a hot take: these are all

acts facilitated by digital technologies and devices. I am not here to pronounce the "death of the book", which, as Simone Murray writes, never did manifest itself despite the pronouncements of early doomsayers (2015, p. 311). But what reading and writing *are* has inevitably already changed. The digital has already changed nearly every aspect of modern life. Why, then, should it not have changed the way we tell stories?

We can fear or reject this future, and we have a right to do so. Yet for so many Indians, and many more in the Global South, the gift of the Internet is an immense privilege, a space of joy, a place to define oneself. Without being overly techno-optimistic, it is critical that researchers, media practitioners and platforms consider the benefits that digital spaces can offer users and strive to make these tools more equitable in their distribution and use. For many Indian users, the rejection of a platform, or of the Internet more broadly, is simply not an option, particularly if it is linked with employment or with making a community. Techno-pessimism, too, is a kind of privilege. Digital archives and platforms often can and do seek to give users opportunities to tell their story, to make sense of the world around them, and to *type back* to the world. Only by encouraging and building a range of accessible digital spaces can we hope to hear from even more voices and understand their stories.

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Appendix I: Interview schedule

Interview Script

Thank you so much for making time to speak with me today. My name is Nayana, and I'm a PhD researcher at the Oxford Internet Institute, which is a department at the University of Oxford. As I've mentioned, I'm doing a PhD, broadly, on publishing and storytelling platforms in India. I am interested in your thoughts on how technology influences digital storytelling in India, and any thoughts you may have on this. I am really keen to hear from you as an expert in this field.

For this interview, if possible it would be great to record our conversation so I can just focus on talking and listening and later listen back to our conversation to make notes. I'll save and store this recording securely, and if you prefer we can have conversations about whether you'd like to have a pseudonym or be completely anonymised when I write this up. Please let me know if you would like to take either of these options. I'm very happy for you to be involved in this and you can always change your mind at any point about this or recall your consent; you just need to email me to let me know.

Does this all sound good to you? Do you have any questions?

- Name of participant:
- Job title:
- Location:

About you:
Tell me about yourself and the work that you do.

Tell me about how you came to work for this platform and why:

What made you decide to build/work for a platform like this?

What's your personal relationship with storytelling?

About the platform:

What is the size of the platform and its team? Can you give me some details about platform metrics?

What is the platform mission or aim?

What are the fast areas growing of the business?

What areas of the country are you targeted towards? What languages are used on the platform?

Who is the main audience for the platform? Who reads it?

Why do you think people are choosing to read this way, via a platform/archive?

Let's talk a little bit about the process of making posts/writing/running the platform. Tell me what a day or a week looks like for you.

Storytelling more broadly:

What insights do you have on publishing/bookselling/ stories in India?

I'd love to hear your thoughts on the impact of digital storytelling in India for the communities/platform/users you work with?

How is technology shaping people's creative practice in India more broadly? Has it shaped your personal reading habits at all?

What do you see as the potential future of storytelling online in India?

What kinds of stories and narratives do you want to see more in India? What stories excite you currently?

Are there any other platforms or people/content creators who do similar work that you think I should speak to or be in touch with?