

## CELEBRATING THE ROLE OF THE SUTRADHAR IN KATHASARITSAGARA

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### Abstract

The Kathasaritsagara, an 11th century Sanskrit composition written by Somadeva Bhatta and containing 350 tales across eighteen books in some twenty thousand stanzas is the oldest extant collection of stories in the world. The Kathasaritsagara is deeply rooted in the oral tradition of storytelling, and the Sutradhar plays a vital role in maintaining that tradition by actively interacting with the listeners. The Sutradhar is not just a narrator; he also acts as the director, stage manager, and often a performer within the play.

In the context of the Kathasaritsagara, the Sutradhar signifies more than just a stage manager or narrator; it represents a crucial role in guiding the audience through the narrative and revealing the deeper meanings and morals embedded within the stories. The Sutradhar working in collaboration with the Orator (the storyteller), helps to deliver the consequential wisdom or moral lessons found in the collection. This paper provides an insight by citing examples in which the Orator and Sutradhar work together in Vetala Pachisi and other engaging stories, to deliver a consequential wisdom or the moral of the story.

**Keywords:** narrative, orator, sutradhar, wisdom, story telling

### Introduction

Often stories, especially the ones that are written in ancient times are read for their picturisation of magical concepts or depiction of olden times and in few cases, reader is left with a form of ‘moral of the story’. However, Kathasaritsagara, an 11th century Sanskrit composition written by Somadeva Bhatta, containing 350 tales told across eighteen books in some twenty thousand stanzas, distinguishes itself from being a mere entertainer and vivid work of magical motives and engaging plots. This magnum opus has been a source of inspiration for generations of storytellers, writers, and artists across the globe. According to critics Somadeva, too, did not invent the stories that make up Kathasaritsagara – many of its tales are also contained in much older works, such as the Buddhist Jatakas, the Panchatantra, the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, and the Puranas and had probably been in existence for centuries, preserved and transmitted orally long before they were ever written down or became a part of Somadeva’s text. The stories in Kathasaritsagara are a testament to the power of narratives to convey wisdom and moral

lessons that are relevant even today. This highlights the importance of orality in the transmission of cultural heritage and knowledge across generations.

### **The Great Indian Orality Tradition:**

The Great Indian Orality Storytelling Tradition is a rich and diverse heritage that spans thousands of years. The Indian oral tradition is an intricate and complex system of storytelling that has been handed down from generation to generation. It includes various forms of storytelling, such as folk tales, myths, legends, fables, epics, and religious stories. These stories were typically passed on orally from one generation to the next, and they were an essential part of people's daily lives. In many ways, storytelling was a way of transmitting knowledge, values, and cultural practices.

In the orality tradition, we often come along The Sutradhar and Storyteller (Kathaka) as two distinct roles in traditional Indian storytelling. While both are involved in the delivery of stories, they have different functions and responsibilities.

The storyteller, also known as the Kathaka, is the person who narrates the story to the audience. They are responsible for bringing the characters to life and creating an engaging and immersive experience for the listeners. The storyteller must possess excellent narrative skills, an engaging personality, and a deep understanding of the story they are telling. They are the primary source of entertainment and are responsible for holding the audience's attention throughout the story.

On the other hand, the Sutradhar, also known as the Nata, is the conductor or guide of the storytelling performance. The term 'Sutradhar' is derived from the Sanskrit word 'Sutra', which means a thread or a guide. The Sutradhar is responsible for setting the context, introducing the characters, and providing background information on the story. They are also responsible for guiding the audience through the narrative, explaining its deeper meanings and moral implications. The Sutradhar acts as a bridge between the story and the audience, helping them to understand the story's significance and relevance. (Prakash 20)

One of the most striking features of Kathasaritsagara is the role of the Orator and Sutradhar in delivering wisdom or the moral of the story. The Orator is the storyteller who narrates the tale, while the Sutradhar is the one who guides the audience through the narrative, explaining its deeper meanings and moral implications. Together, they work to deliver a consequential wisdom that is both engaging and thought-provoking.

### **Power of Narratives in Vetala Pachisi**

A classic example of the role of the Orator and Sutradhar in delivering wisdom is found in the story of Vetala Pachisi in Kathasaritsagara. The story follows King Vikramaditya, who is tasked with capturing a Vetala, or vampire, and bringing it back to a sage. Each time Vikramaditya captures the Vetala, it tells him a story, and at the end of each story, the Vetala asks the king a riddle. If the king answers the riddle correctly, the Vetala allows him to take it back to the sage. If not, the Vetala escapes and the king must capture it again. In the Vetala Pachisi, one of the most famous tales in the Kathasaritsagara, the Orator and the Sutradhar play essential roles in shaping the narrative.

The Orator in the Vetala Pachisi is King Vikramaditya, a wise and just ruler who is known for his bravery and intelligence. In the story, the Orator must go on a dangerous quest to capture a Vetala, a demon who inhabits a dead body and possesses great magical powers. The Orator must capture the Vetala and bring it back to the sorcerer who has requested its capture.

However, the Vetala is a master of deception and trickery and engages the Orator in a series of riddles and puzzles that challenge his wit and wisdom.

The Sutradhar in the Vetala Pachisi is the storyteller who guides the narrative and provides context and explanation for the story. The Sutradhar serves as a mediator between the Orator and the audience, weaving together the different threads of the narrative and connecting them to broader themes and motifs.

Through these stories, the Vetala imparts wisdom to the king, forcing him to confront moral dilemmas and ethical quandaries. The stories deal with issues such as honesty, loyalty, betrayal, and sacrifice, and offer nuanced perspectives on these complex topics. The Sutradhar, in turn, helps the audience understand the deeper meanings and implications of each story, guiding them towards a more profound understanding of the moral lesson.

### Power of Narratives in the story of Naravahanadatta

Another example of the power of narratives in Kathasaritsagara is the story of Naravahanadatta, a prince who is born with a jewel in his forehead that is believed to bring misfortune to his family. His father, King Udayana, orders the jewel to be removed and hidden, but it is eventually stolen and ends up in the hands of the king's enemy, the sorcerer Vidyahara. Naravahanadatta sets out on a quest to reclaim the jewel, and along the way, he encounters various challenges and obstacles.

The story of Naravahanadatta is a powerful allegory for the journey of self-discovery and self-realization. The jewel in Naravahanadatta's forehead represents his true potential, which is hidden and suppressed by his family and society. The challenges he faces on his quest symbolize the obstacles and difficulties that one must overcome to discover their true selves and reach their full potential. The story offers a powerful message of perseverance, resilience, and self-belief, urging readers to embrace their true selves and follow their own paths.

To conclude, the Great Indian Orality Storytelling Tradition is a vital part of India's cultural heritage, and it continues to influence literature, art, and culture today. The Kathasaritsagara is an excellent example of how the Indian oral tradition has influenced literature and culture, and it showcases the enduring power of narratives as a means of transmitting knowledge, values, and cultural practices across generations. The oral techniques and narrative styles of Kathasaritsagara have influenced storytelling beyond India, inspiring works like Arabian Nights and resonating with global practices that value oral traditions and live storytelling.

In essence, celebrating Indian orality in Kathasaritsagara means honoring its role as a living tradition that merges literature, performance, and cultural education—underscoring the power of spoken word to traverse time, engage minds, and preserve the richness of Indian heritage.

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