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Digital Storytelling in Indian Literature

Rinu Pauly

Assistant professor, Department of English, Don Bosco college, Thrissur , India

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Abstract

This paper examines the emergence and evolution of digital storytelling in contemporary Indian literature, analyzing how technological platforms have transformed narrative forms, authorial practices, and reader engagement. Drawing on postcolonial digital humanities frameworks, this study explores the intersection of traditional Indian literary aesthetics with digital affordances, investigating how Indian writers utilize blogs, social media, web serials, and multimedia platforms to create innovative narrative forms. The analysis reveals that digital storytelling in India represents both a continuation of India's rich oral and written literary traditions and a radical reimagining of narrative possibilities. Key findings indicate that digital platforms have democratized literary production, enabled multilingual experimentation, and fostered new forms of participatory storytelling. The paper argues that Indian digital literature challenges Western-centric models of digital narratives while simultaneously engaging with global digital literary movements. This study contributes to understanding how digital technologies reshape literary culture in postcolonial contexts, offering implications for digital humanities scholarship, literary studies, and discussions of cultural production in the Global South.

Keywords: - Digital storytelling, Contemporary Indian literature, Postcolonial digital humanities, Digital narratives, Multilingual experimentation, Cultural production

I. INTRODUCTION

The landscape of Indian literature has undergone a profound transformation in the twenty-first century, driven by the proliferation of digital technologies and internet connectivity. From the early 2000s, when Indian writers began experimenting with personal blogs and online literary magazines, to the contemporary moment characterized by sophisticated multimedia storytelling platforms, web serials, and social media-based narratives, digital storytelling has emerged as a significant force in Indian literary culture. This evolution reflects broader patterns of technological adoption in India, where internet penetration has grown from approximately 4% of the population in 2007 to over 45% by 2023, with particularly rapid growth in mobile internet access.

Digital storytelling in the Indian context presents unique characteristics that distinguish it from Western digital literary movements. Indian digital literature operates within a complex linguistic landscape encompassing 22 officially recognized languages and hundreds of regional dialects, a postcolonial literary tradition that negotiates between indigenous and colonial influences, and a rapidly evolving technological infrastructure marked by significant urban-rural and class-based digital divides. These contextual factors shape how Indian writers employ digital platforms, what kinds of narratives they create, and how readers engage with digital literary texts.

This paper examines three interconnected dimensions of digital storytelling in Indian literature: the technological platforms and infrastructures that enable digital literary production; the aesthetic and formal innovations that characterize Indian digital narratives; and the socio-cultural implications of the digital transformation of Indian literary culture. The analysis draws on postcolonial digital humanities frameworks that recognize how digital technologies are neither culturally neutral nor uniformly experienced across global contexts. By centering Indian digital literary practices, this study contributes to decolonizing digital humanities scholarship and expanding understanding of how digital storytelling manifests in diverse cultural and linguistic contexts.

II. THEORETICAL GROUNDING

This study is grounded in three theoretical frameworks: digital humanities scholarship on electronic literature and new media narratives, postcolonial literary theory, and cultural theories of technology. The integration of these frameworks enables a nuanced analysis of how Indian digital storytelling both participates in and challenges dominant paradigms of digital literature.

Digital humanities scholarship has established that electronic literature and digital storytelling represent not merely the digitization of print texts but fundamentally new literary forms enabled by computational affordances (Hayles, 2008). Hypertext theory, developed by Landow (2006), emphasized how digital environments enable non-linear, reader-directed narratives that challenge traditional print narrative structures. Contemporary scholarship on digital storytelling (Murray, 2017) extends these insights to examine multimodal narratives that integrate text, image, sound, and interactive elements. However, much of this foundational work emerged from Western contexts and centered on English-language digital literature, creating a need for frameworks that account for digital literary practices in non-Western contexts.

Postcolonial theory provides essential analytical tools for understanding how Indian digital storytelling operates within histories of colonialism, linguistic imperialism, and ongoing negotiations between local and global cultural forces. The work of postcolonial theorists (Chakrabarty, 2000; Spivak, 1988) emphasizes how cultural production in postcolonial contexts must be understood through attention to power dynamics, hybrid identities, and the politics of representation. Applied to digital contexts, postcolonial approaches (Risam, 2019) examine how digital technologies both enable new forms of cultural expression and potentially reproduce colonial patterns of knowledge production and cultural hegemony.

Cultural theories of technology, particularly scholarship examining the social construction of technology and technology adoption in Global South contexts, provide frameworks for understanding how digital platforms are adapted, reshaped, and indigenized through local practices. This perspective recognizes that technologies are not neutral tools with predetermined effects but are shaped through cultural practices, institutional contexts, and user agency. Applied to Indian digital storytelling, this framework highlights how Indian writers and readers actively shape digital platforms to serve local literary and cultural needs, rather than passively adopting technologies designed primarily for Western markets.

III. ANALYSIS: PLATFORMS AND PRACTICES OF INDIAN DIGITAL STORYTELLING

The rise of digital storytelling in Indian literature can be traced through several key platforms and technological developments. Early manifestations emerged in the mid-2000s through personal blogs and online literary magazines that provided spaces for emerging writers to publish work outside traditional gatekeeping structures of print publishing. Platforms such as BlogSpot and WordPress hosted thousands of Indian writers experimenting with web-based writing, creating serialized narratives, and building online literary communities. These early digital literary spaces were characterized by relatively simple textual formats that largely replicated print conventions while leveraging the accessibility and interactivity of online publishing.

The proliferation of social media platforms from the late 2000s onward introduced new possibilities for digital storytelling. Twitter's character limit inspired innovative micro-fiction experiments, with Indian writers creating entire narratives within 140 or 280 characters, or crafting serialized stories through threaded tweets. Instagram enabled visual storytelling through photo-text combinations, with Indian writers and artists creating narrative sequences through image posts and captions. Facebook groups and pages became venues for literary communities, story sharing, and collaborative writing projects. These social media platforms democratized literary production, enabling writers without access to traditional publishing networks to reach substantial audiences.

A particularly significant development has been the emergence of dedicated digital storytelling platforms designed specifically for the Indian market. Platforms such as Juggernaut Books, which launched in

2015 as a mobile-first reading app focused on Indian writing, and Pratilipi, which provides a space for user-generated content in multiple Indian languages, represent attempts to create digital literary infrastructures tailored to Indian contexts. Wattpad, while a global platform, has gained substantial traction among Indian writers and readers (Ramdarshan Bold, 2018), particularly for serialized fiction in English and regional languages. These platforms enable features such as chapter-by-chapter serialization, reader comments and voting, and algorithmic recommendations that shape how stories are discovered and consumed.

Mobile technology has proven particularly transformative for Indian digital storytelling. With smartphone penetration far exceeding computer ownership in India (Mehta & Mukherji, 2015), mobile-optimized platforms and mobile-first design have become essential considerations for digital literary production. Many Indian digital stories are now created specifically for mobile consumption, with short chapters, frequent cliffhangers, and formats optimized for small screens and interrupted reading experiences. The rise of vernacular digital content, enabled by improved support for Indic language scripts on mobile devices, has further expanded the digital literary landscape beyond English-language dominance.

Multimedia and transmedia storytelling represents another dimension of Indian digital literature. Web series, podcasts, and YouTube narratives have created spaces for audio-visual storytelling that draws on India's strong oral narrative traditions while leveraging digital affordances. Some projects integrate multiple platforms, creating transmedia narratives where story elements are distributed across websites, social media, podcasts, and video content, requiring audiences to engage across platforms to access the complete narrative. These transmedia experiments reflect how Indian storytellers are innovating with digital forms while drawing on indigenous narrative traditions that have long emphasized oral performance, episodic structure, and audience participation.

IV. INTERPRETATION: AESTHETIC AND CULTURAL DIMENSIONS

The aesthetic forms and cultural meanings of Indian digital storytelling reveal complex negotiations between tradition and innovation, local and global, elite and popular. Several key patterns characterize Indian digital narratives and distinguish them from Western digital literary movements.

First, Indian digital storytelling demonstrates strong continuities with traditional Indian narrative forms. The serialized, episodic structure common to many digital narratives echoes traditional Sanskrit epics (Narayan, 2006), oral storytelling traditions, and popular narrative forms such as the *kissa* and *dastan* (Mukherjee, 2000). Many digital stories incorporate elements of traditional narrative frames, embedded stories, and digressive structures that connect to classical Indian literary aesthetics rather than Western linear plot conventions (Chaudhuri, 2008). The participatory dimension of digital storytelling, where readers comment, vote, and influence narrative directions, resonates with traditional oral storytelling contexts where audiences actively engage with and shape performances.

Second, linguistic hybridity and multilingualism characterize much Indian digital literature. Code-switching between English and regional languages, transliteration using Roman scripts for Indian languages, and the creation of hybrid linguistic forms reflect the multilingual realities of Indian society. Digital platforms enable experimentation with script and language in ways that print publishing, with its technical and economic constraints around non-Roman scripts, often discouraged. This linguistic innovation challenges monolingual assumptions embedded in much digital humanities scholarship and demonstrates how digital technologies can support rather than suppress linguistic diversity.

Third, Indian digital storytelling engages with and reimagines questions of cultural identity, modernity, and globalization. Digital narratives frequently explore tensions between tradition and change, rural and urban, local and global, using digital forms to examine how technology itself shapes contemporary Indian experience. Stories set in call centers, IT companies, and digital startups have become a distinct genre, reflecting India's position within global digital economies. At the same time, digital platforms enable the circulation of narratives about rural life, regional cultures, and marginalized communities that have often been underrepresented in English-language print publishing dominated by urban, cosmopolitan perspectives.

Fourth, the economics and accessibility of digital storytelling have significant cultural implications. Digital platforms lower barriers to entry for aspiring writers, enabling literary production by individuals who might face obstacles in traditional print publishing due to class, caste, region, gender, or lack of educational credentials. User-generated content platforms in particular have enabled the emergence of popular genres such as romance, thriller, and fantasy writing by non-elite authors writing for mass audiences. This democratization challenges established literary hierarchies and elite definitions of literary value, creating tension between traditional literary establishments and emerging digital literary cultures.

V. IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The rise of digital storytelling in Indian literature carries significant implications for literary studies, digital humanities scholarship, and understanding of contemporary cultural production. This phenomenon demonstrates that digital literary cultures are neither universal nor uniform, but are shaped by specific cultural, linguistic, and infrastructural contexts that must be accounted for in scholarly analysis.

For literary studies, Indian digital storytelling challenges both Western-centric frameworks for understanding electronic literature and nationalist frameworks that emphasize print literary traditions as repositories of authentic cultural identity. It demonstrates how digital technologies enable new forms of literary experimentation while simultaneously creating continuities with oral and traditional narrative forms. This suggests the need for literary theoretical frameworks that can account for how digital and traditional forms interact and hybridize rather than treating them as opposed or mutually exclusive categories.

For digital humanities, this study underscores the importance of postcolonial and decolonial approaches that recognize how digital technologies and digital cultural forms are shaped by global inequalities, colonial histories, and ongoing dynamics of cultural imperialism and resistance. It demonstrates that effective digital humanities scholarship must attend to questions of linguistic diversity, technological infrastructure, and cultural specificity rather than assuming universal digital experiences or imposing Western models of digital culture onto non-Western contexts.

The phenomenon also raises important questions about the future of Indian literature and global literary culture. Will digital storytelling primarily serve as a pathway into traditional print publishing, or will it develop as a distinct and valued literary domain? How will the democratization of literary production through digital platforms interact with established literary institutions and definitions of literary quality? What role will corporate digital platforms, with their algorithms, business models, and cultural biases, play in shaping Indian literary culture? How will questions of digital preservation and archiving affect the availability of contemporary Indian digital literature for future scholars and readers?

Several areas warrant further research. Comparative studies examining digital storytelling across different regions and languages within India could illuminate how linguistic and cultural diversity shapes digital literary practices. Audience studies examining how readers engage with, interpret, and value digital literature could provide insights into reception and cultural meaning-making. Analysis of the political economy of digital literary platforms could examine how business models, algorithmic recommendation systems, and platform governance shape literary production and circulation. Historical studies tracing the development of Indian digital literature from early experiments to contemporary forms could provide deeper understanding of how digital literary cultures evolve over time.

VI. CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the rise of digital storytelling in Indian literature, analyzing the platforms, practices, aesthetics, and cultural implications of this significant transformation in contemporary Indian literary culture. The analysis demonstrates that Indian digital storytelling represents neither a simple adoption of Western digital literary forms nor a rejection of traditional literary values, but rather a complex process of innovation, adaptation, and hybridization that draws on India's rich narrative traditions while engaging with global digital technologies and literary movements.

Digital storytelling in India reflects the specific cultural, linguistic, and technological contexts of contemporary Indian society. The multilingual experimentation, continuation of traditional narrative structures, democratization of literary production, and engagement with questions of identity and modernity that characterize Indian digital literature demonstrate how digital technologies are indigenized and adapted to local needs and aesthetics. This specificity challenges universal or Western-centric models of digital literature and underscores the importance of culturally-situated analysis of digital cultural forms.

The study contributes to ongoing efforts to decolonize digital humanities by centering non-Western digital literary practices and demonstrating the limitations of frameworks developed primarily through analysis of Western digital culture. It suggests that effective digital humanities scholarship must attend to questions of power, inequality, cultural difference, and historical context rather than treating digital technologies as culturally neutral or as producing uniform effects across diverse global contexts.

As Indian digital storytelling continues to evolve, driven by ongoing technological changes, expanding internet access, and new generations of digitally-native writers and readers, it will undoubtedly generate new literary forms, cultural meanings, and scholarly questions. Understanding this dynamic field requires sustained

attention to both technological and cultural dimensions, recognition of how global and local forces interact, and openness to literary forms and values that may challenge established critical frameworks. The rise of digital storytelling in Indian literature thus represents not merely a national or regional phenomenon, but a significant development in global literary culture that demands serious scholarly engagement and analysis.

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