
**ECHOES OF POWER: GOSSIP, WHISPERS, AND RUMOUR IN
INDIAN HISTORY**

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DOI: <https://doi-doi.org/101555/ijarp.2159>**ABSTRACT**

Echoes of Power: Gossip, Whispers, and Rumour in Indian History examines the cultural, political, and philosophical role of informal speech in shaping authority, social order, and collective consciousness in India. Challenging the notion of gossip as trivial, the paper argues that whispered communication functioned as a crucial medium of negotiation, surveillance, and resistance in premodern societies. Drawing on interdisciplinary approaches from sociology, philosophy, and reception theory, it situates Indian oral practices within a broader global context in which unofficial speech could both legitimise and destabilise power. Through close readings of Vedic hymns, Upanishadic dialogues, the *Mahābhārata*, the *Rāmāyaṇa*, and Kautilya's *Arthaśāstra*, the study demonstrates how whispers operated simultaneously as instruments of control and as vehicles of dissent. The Vedic concept of *vāc* (speech) intensifies this ambivalence, attributing sacred potency to words while acknowledging their disruptive potential. The discussion further explores gendered and spatial dimensions, showing how courtyards, temples, and monastic spaces shaped the acoustic circulation of secrets, and how women's whisper networks enabled subtle forms of social regulation. By reinterpreting gossip as a dynamic cultural force, the paper recovers the muted voices of everyday life and reveals how murmured conversations quietly shaped the moral and political fabric of Indian history.

KEYWORDS: Gossip and Power, Whispers and Informal Speech, Authority and Speech, Rumour, Social Regulation, Gender.

INTRODUCTION

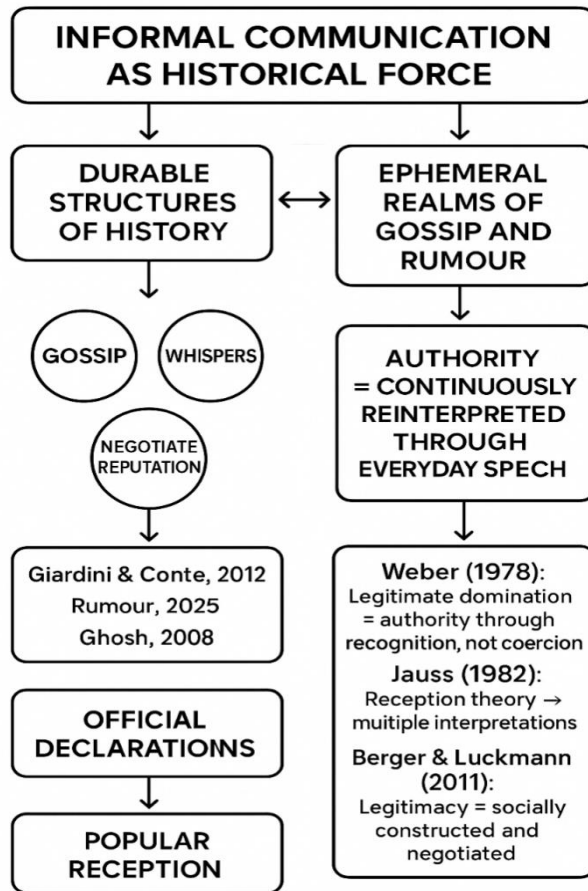


Figure 1 -Informal communication as a historical force.

Underneath and beside the solid structures of history lies a muted but equally powerful form of communication: gossip, whispers, and rumors. This type of communication is a thread that weaves itself through almost every aspect of life—political activity, ritual practice, and daily existence—despite the fact that many academics view it as insignificant or unofficial. These pieces of communication may be fleeting; however, the value they have culturally is great, as they provide a means for establishing authority, establishing reputation, and a way to express subtle types of resistance within a community.

Before looking at India we should place it in a larger world context regarding rulers seeking advice through spoken communication as well as through written inscriptions. Gossip is used by rulers as a way of regulating the behaviour of their subjects without resorting to formal institutions. Giardini & Conte (2012) note that "Gossip is a form of social control (and thus a way to enforce) that does not require an extensive use of the law or formal punishment to

control people's behaviour". The Cambridge Dictionary (Rumour, 2025) further describes a rumour as "An interesting informal story or item of news that may be true, made up or possibly both but which can be passed from one person to another very quickly". Rumour can also be associated with South Asian subaltern historiography in that it has great potential for being used for elite purposes as there is no definitive evidence either supporting or disproving the validity of a particular rumour (Ghosh, 2008). In an predominantly oral culture, gossip was and continues to be the primary medium of social knowledge, and that is why so much of the content of many traditional forms of expressive culture includes themes of slander; honour; and doubt expressed through whispering.

Although a royal inscription serves to provide a king with divine legitimacy, the authority of the inscription also relies on the whispers of people within marketplaces, courtyards and temple courtyards, and not only the authority of the inscription itself. Weber's theory of legitimate domination explains that authority is not derived from force but from recognition (Weber, 1978). Reception theory also shows that inscriptions have polysemous qualities which lead to differing interpretations based on the social status of the interpreter, such as one class of individuals being elite, one class being priestly and the final class being commoners (Jauss, 1982). Berger and Luckmann (2011) make the assertion that legitimacy is not something that is given to the population but rather is continuously negotiated in the routine processes of daily conversations, rituals, and gossip.

There are multiple examples in history that illustrate this phenomenon in various civilizations. For example, the Behistun Inscription (circa 520 BCE) of Darius I was used to represent divine sanction from Ahura Mazda to his rule, yet the authority of the Behistun inscription relied on the populace receiving it positively (Kuhrt, 2007). Additionally, whereas the Assyrian annals boasted of limitless conquests, the manner in which ordinary people interpreted those records was different than the manner in which the nobility or priesthood interpreted the records (Liverani, 1979). Just as in the case of how Ramses II's (Assman) presenting his victory over Kadesh demonstrates how propaganda can supersede an actual stalemate and validate ongoing conquest) was shown to be interpreted.

Additionally, Ashoka's Rock Edicts proclaiming dhamma were received differently by the monks, the bureaucrats, and the villagers (Thapar, 2000), as was the interpretation of Augustus' Res Gestae by the provincial populace through their own local customs (Galinsky, 2012).

II. Sacred Speech and the Power of Whispers

In India, speech became more than just a mode of communication; it developed a richer role due to its dual function of being both divine and potentially chaotic. This duality, a common feature of societies where actions were guided by ethical or moral codes and authority figure roles, had an effect on the political use of speech as well. In other cultures, speech typically was used for purposes of authority and control over people, at least as a function of authority or propaganda; in India, however, as speech was established as both “create” and “destroy,” its informal uses allow for a unique marketplace of different ideas to exist simultaneously.

Typical of ancient India, historiography is dominated by dynastic history, monumental structures/buildings, and philosophical writings that celebrate the enduring character of these entities as well as their influence on human behaviour (Tripathi, 2014), but in light of the fact that the latter forms of documentation only represent one small section of the continuum of history; the earliest layers of documentation contain examples of uses of spoken words to form the very fabric of society.

Based on the Vedic perspective, speech (*vāc*) is not only a means of communication; it is the source of all things (Goswami, 1989). The hymns of the Rigveda describe how the goddess of speech is the mediator between humans and gods, and speak of sound/environment/energy and how it will affect the physical world (Chappelle, 2021). The sacredness of the spoken word is a major contributing factor to India's continued tension with regard to gossip and whispering (i.e., the potential for creating something as well as destroying something).

The *Vāk Sūkta* appears in the 10th *Maṇḍala* of the *Rigveda Samhitā* as *Sūkta* (सुक्त) number 125. The seer of this mantra is *Vāk*, the daughter of Ṛṣi *Ambhṛṇā*, giving rise to the full name *Vāgāmbhṛṇī*. The deity is also *Vāgāmbhṛṇī*, indicating that the seer is fully identified with the deity in this *Sūkta*. The *Ṛṣikā* meditates upon the Self—which can also be interpreted as (a) the primordial speech (*Parāvāk*, according to later Kashmiri Śaiva philosophies), or (b) the first letter *va* in the primordial *śabda*—and on its creative powers, joyfully proclaiming these verses in praise of the Self (*ātman*) –

- 1) अहं रुद्रेभिर्वसुभिश्चराम्यहमादित्यैरुत विश्वदेवैः ।
अहं मित्रावरुणोभा बिभर्म्यहमिन्द्राग्नी अहमश्विनोभा ॥

-I walk with the Vasus and Rudras, with the Adityas, as also with the All-gods, Vishva Deva. Mitra and Varuna, both I hold aloft, even so Indra and Agni I do, and the Ashvin-twins too.(Rgveda 10.125.1, as cited in Sastry, 1951)

2) अहं सोममाहनसं बिभर्म्यहं त्वष्टारमुत पूषणं भगम् ।
अहं दधामि द्रविणं हविष्मते सुप्राव्ये यजमानाय सुन्वते ॥

-I uphold and cherish the Soma that is to be pressed out (for the delight of the Gods) and am the supporter of the Divine sculptor Tvashtri, and of Bhaga and Pushan. I hold the wealth for the sacrificer who reaches to the Gods the pleasing offerings of Soma and Havis. (Rgveda 10.125.2, as cited in Sastry, 1951)

3) अहं राष्ट्रि संगमनी वसूनां चिकितुषी प्रथमायज्ञियानाम् ।
तां मा देवा व्यदधुः पुरुत्रा भूरिस्थात्रां भूर्यविशयन्तीम् ॥

- I am the Queen, I am the dispenser of wealth; conscious, I am the first among the Gods (for whom the sacrifice is meant).

Such am I (the One) and the Gods have found me established in the Many, permeating and taking possession of the Manifold (existence)(Rigveda 10.125.3, as cited in Sastry, 1951).

4) मया सो अन्नमत्ति यो विपश्यति । प्राणिति य ईं शृणोत्युक्तम् ।
अमन्तवो मां त उप क्षियन्ति श्रुधि श्रुत श्रद्धिवं ते वदामि ॥

- It is by Me (by the sole Power) that one eats his food, sees, breathes and hears what is said. They that ignore me (with their thought not turned to me) run to ruin. Hear, I declare to thee, the truth of faith, hearken! (Rgveda 10.125.4, as cited in Sastry, 1951)

5. अहमेव स्वयमिदं वदामि जुष्टं देवैभिरुत मानुषेभिः ।
यं कामये तं तमेव ब्रूमि तं ब्रह्माणं तं ऋषिं तं सुमेधाम् ॥

- Of my own accord, I announce this (truth) which the Gods as well as men strive to reach. Whomsoever I love, I make him mighty, him a Brahman, him a Rishi, him a man of pure understanding. (Rgveda 10.125.5, as cited in Sastry, 1951)

5) अहं रुद्राय धनुरातनोमि ब्रह्मद्विषे शरवे हन्तवा उ ।
अहं जनाय समदं कृणोम्यहं द्यावापृथिवी आ विवेश ॥

- For Rudra I stretch the bow—for the destruction of the tyrant, of the Veda-hater (Brahma-dvit). On the people I bestow equal joy in battle and I have permeated Heaven and Earth (R̥gveda 10.125.6, as cited in Sastry, 1951).

6) अहं सुवे पितरमस्य मूर्धन् मम योनिरप्स्वन्तः समुद्रे ।
ततो वि तिष्ठे भुवनानि विश्वोतामूं द्यां वर्ष्मणा स्पृशामि ॥

- I gave birth to the Father (Heaven) at the summit of This (creation, Earth). My origin is in the Waters in the Inner Ocean.¹ Thence I extend pervading all the worlds; and yonder Heaven I closely touch and penetrate with the showering and flowing body of mine, *varshmana* (R̥gveda 10.125.7, as cited in Sastry, 1951).

8) अहमेव वात इव प्र वाम्यारभमाणा भुवनानि विश्वा ।
परो दिवा पर एना पृथिव्यैतावती महिना सं बभूव ॥

-Like the winds I blow vehemently, myself commencing all the worlds; far beyond the heavens, far (beneath) the Earth—so vast by my largeness I have become (R̥gveda 10.125.8, as cited in Sastry, 1951).

Speech had both creative and destructive powers according to the ancient Indians. Because it was deemed that words could become a source of danger when a speaker lost control of his or her words, any verbal expression (e.g., saying the wrong word, or expressing a word incorrectly) could lead to chaos, not order in the world (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad; Taittiriya Upanishad Bhashya Vartika; Chandogya Upanishad Shankara Bhashya; www.wisdomlib.org, 2025). This uncertainty produced typed governing rules regarding sound within Brahmimic society's largest sub-group, the priests. Detailed instructions regarding the proper manner in which mantras would be recited were contained in books of ritual instructions (e.g., aloud within the ritual space, spoken under the breath at the same time that one's actions were being performed, and whispered into the ear of the person who is a novice/prospective member of the Brahmin religious order). Additionally, silence was held in the highest regard because one who could refrain from using their voice to communicate had attained self-control and had demonstrated discipline in their observation of the proper manner to conduct rituals. The

Kena Upanishad states: यद्वाचाऽनभ्युदितं येन वागभ्युद्यते ("This is known as the thing from which sound is produced.") (I.5); यच्छ्रोत्रेण न शृणोति येन श्रोत्रमिदं श्रुतम् ("He who hears does not hear.") and तदेव ब्रह्म त्वं विद्धि नेदं यदिदमुपासते ("See how the formless, the un-made has become one with you; there is no longer a single thing.")

To know Brahman, there must be an absence of personal ego in the knower's consciousness; when this occurs, the knower will then have the opportunity for the essence of Brahman to reveal itself spontaneously to the knower. At this state, knowing no longer is produced by the knower and both the knower/known and not-knowing space are void of any projections of the self. The subtle and finely attuned mind will hear the "voice of silence" as it responds to the subtlest suggestion of Brahman. A mind void of the quality of sattva must also experience the total stillness. As per Yajnavalkya, the oneness that is Brahman can not be experienced until the seeker has transcended both mauna (silence) and amauna (speech) (Mehta, 1970).

Using sound in a ritual was not just intended for correct procedure/responsibility in its use, but also who had permission or access to sound. By having designated words be used said publicly, muttered or thought out loud, or whispered in private, ancient priestly traditions turned speech into a form of hierarchy and "belonging". Sacred lessons were not available to everyone, but rather were kept protected until they could be delivered through means of selective secrecy often via whispered initiations. Spiritual authorities would teach holy/secret items to chosen individuals in private, secret locations.

In addition, there was a specific culture of whispering within the Tantric traditions to emphasise the power of a secret or secretly whispered recited mantra (White, 2000). Therefore, in these particular cases the use of the word "whisper" took on a physical characteristic beyond merely being a sound to a means of representation of the difference in "insiders" and the "outsiders", while lending authority to the use of knowledge based on who was given access.

III. Whispered Knowledge and Esoteric Authority

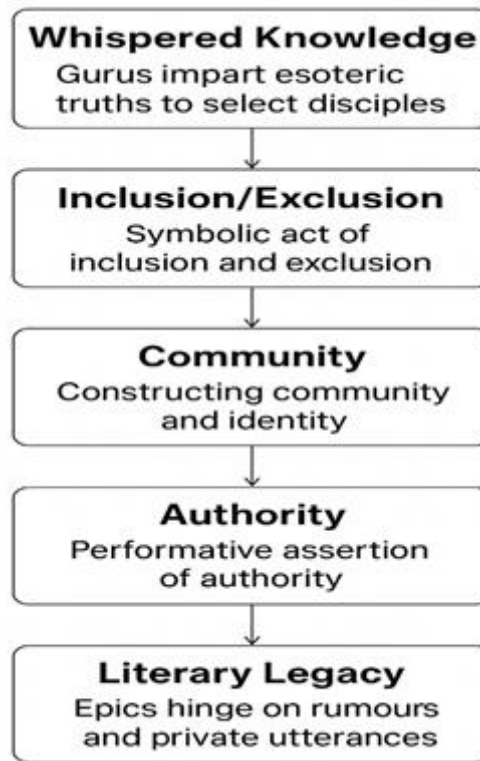


Figure 2-Whispered knowledge as a social and cultural mechanism.

Whispers of Mantra - Mantras that are whispered provide a community of exclusivity through secrecy. Access to the sacred was closely guarded by not allowing all access to this sacred knowledge; only those who were deemed worthy could gain access. It is common in Indian tradition that a guru confers profound truths to his disciples by whispering in their ear (Hinduism and the Guru-Disciple Relationship - Beezone Library, n.d.).

The practice of whispering is viewed as an act of inclusion and exclusion in a ritualised way because whispers create a boundary that delineates between insiders and outsiders (White, 2000; Kapali Sastry, 1996). Additionally, to be part of the circle that receives whispered truths is to be recognised as part of the lineage of knowledge; conversely, to remain outside this lineage is to be part of a culture of partially deranged/incorrect understanding.

Therefore, from the beginning of the intellectual history of India, whispers have both transmitted doctrine and formed a community of identity and authority. This creates sacred speech that is the basis of India's creativity in literature, as witnessed in the epic stories where the family history of a dynasty can be changed or affected by reputation and private dialogue.

IV. Whispers in Epics and Statecraft



Figure 3- The power of secret speech in Indian thought.

In Indian philosophy, secret speech has great significance because there have been many authors on this subject in political and literature traditions. For example, Manu and Kautilya were examples of classical lawgivers who wrote about the importance of espionage and secrets of communication, as did the authors of two epics, the Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata; these texts define and illustrate that spies were very important to any state's success. The way spies were written about in various treatises along with the way spies were portrayed through kāvya and opera demonstrate the incredible importance that spies had to the state's operations. For a king to successfully outsmart his adversary he must have secretly obtained information regarding army strength, loyalty of subjects and availability of strategic resources to outsmart his adversary. The great extent to which espionage was institutionalised in Indian politics is apparent from the strict guidelines that governed it (Chatterjee, 1958)—although the strict regulation of espionage is an example of the institutionalisation of espionage in Indian politics.

The Mahābhārata gives us a very clear example of how secret speech and private conversation were dangerous through the portrayal of a number of examples of dynastic rivalry. Conflict in the Mahābhārata arises out of much less dramatic events than the act of declaring war. An incident occurs where Draupadī is publicly shamed by the Kauravas, whose acts are made worse by the ridicule that is perpetrated by those individuals who were using gossip to decrease her social standing and create doubt about her reputation—the shame and dishonour that were imposed upon her at the Kaurava assembly were magnified by the accompanying ridicule and speculation from those in attendance in the assembly. Therefore, it can be concluded that secret speech has a central role in the political and social world; the political and social world has changed course because of it just as armies and written orders would have done.

Several recent studies confirm that rumours are an aged but still effective form of communication with potential for using these types of communication as a means of influencing public perception, generating fear and destabilizing communities (Ramos et al, 2015, Kosfeld, 2005, Zhao et al, 2011). Rumours will serve many functions; spread or generate suspicion about an adversary, divert attention from an issue, identify a social concern, or help to create a collective identity (Kostka, Oswald and Wattenhofer, 2008, Zhao, Wang, Chen, Wang, Cheng and Cui, 2012). Similar to how they were demonstrated in mythology, whispers in the real world also serve to create both unity and division within groups.

In the Ramayana, the dangers of misguided communication are warned against. Sita's Agni Pariksha (trial by fire) is the result of the rumours and whispers that sow doubt and distrust. This is a clear reminder of the damaging effects of unbridled criticism and gossip. The epic pushes us to focus our discussions on understanding, empathy, and positive solutions. (Misra, 2024; Shepherd, 2024)-

“For she dwelt in Ravan's dwelling, -rumour clouds a woman's fame-
Righteous Rama's brow was clouded, saintly Sita spake in shame:
"Wherefore spake ye not, my Rama, if your bosom doubts my faith,
Dearer than a dark suspicion to a woman were her death!
Wherefore, Rama, with your token came your vassal o'er the wave,
To assist a fallen woman and a tainted wife to save,
Wherefore with your mighty forces crossed the ocean in your pride,

Risked your life in endless combats for a sin-polluted bride?
Hast thou, Rama, all forgotten? -Saintly Janak saw my birth,
Child of harvest-bearing furrow, Sita sprang from Mother Earth,
As a maiden true and stainless unto thee I gave my hand,
As a consort fond and faithful roved with thee from land to land!
But a woman pleadeth vainly when suspicion clouds her name,
Lakshman, if thou lov'st thy sister, light for me the funeral flame,
When the shadow of dishonour darkens o'er a woman's life,
Death alone is friend and refuge of a true and trustful wife,
When a righteous lord and husband turns his cold averted eyes,
Funeral flame dispels suspicion, honour lives when woman dies!"
Dark was Rama's gloomy visage, and his lips were firmly sealed,
And his eye betrayed no weakness, word disclosed no thought concealed,
Silent heaved his heart in anguish, silent drooped his tortured head,
Lakshman with a throbbing bosom funeral pyre for Sita made,
And Videha's sinless daughter prayed unto the Gods above,
On her lord and wedded consort cast her dying looks of love!
"If in act and thought," she uttered, "I am true unto my name,
Witness of our sins and virtues, may this Fire protect my fame!
If a false and lying scandal brings a faithful woman shame,
Witness of our sins and virtues, may this Fire protect my fame!
If in lifelong loving duty I am free from sin and blame,
Witness of our sins and virtues, may this Fire protect my fame!"
Fearless in her faith and valour Sita stepped upon the pyre,
And her form of beauty vanished circled by the clasping fire,
And an anguish shook the people like the ocean tempest-tost,
Old and young and maid and matron wept for Sita true and lost,
For bedecked in golden splendour and in gems and rich attire,
Sita vanished in the red fire of the newly lighted pyre!
Rishis and the great Gandharvas, Gods who know each secret deed,
Witnessed Sita's high devotion and a woman's lofty creed,
And the earth by ocean girdled with its wealth of teeming life,
Witnessed deed of dauntless duty of a true and stainless wife!"
- (V., Dutt, 1910).

After Sita was given a trial by fire she proved herself innocent, but in the end was exiled by Rama due to public pressure because people questioned her honour. This event illustrates how a woman's fate can be determined by whispers and offhand comments, because reputations are built and destroyed; gossip is the currency of social life (Giardini & Conte, 2012). Dynastic stability can fail not because of military might, but because of the weight of suspicion from the community; therefore, rumour is as devastating as war.

The power of gossip to shape society is also expressed in Sanskrit drama. For instance, Bhavabhuti's Uttara Rāma Charita (the continuation of the saga of Rama and Sita after Ravana's death) demonstrates that gossip is one of the most powerful forces in society. According to Kidambi Narayanan, Bhavabhuti makes it clear that gossip is more difficult to vanquish than Ravana. Enemies can be defeated with weapons, but gossip will always be generated daily by idle tongues wishing to damage reputations. In an insightful sloka, it is pointed out that while the learned occupy their time with study, and other people occupy their time with sleeping; the worst offenders are those who gossip, lie and create unrest (Evils of Gossip, 2018).

V. Espionage and the Institutionalization of Gossip

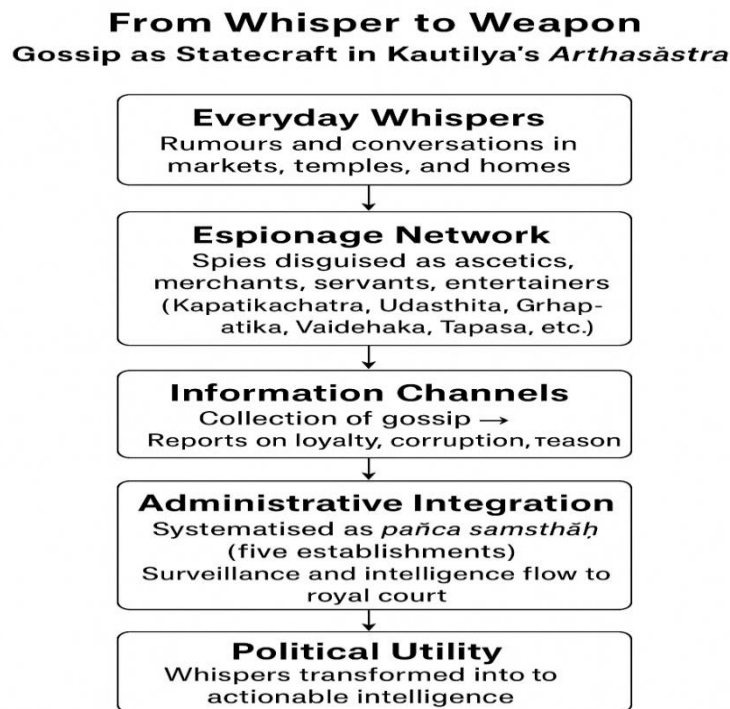


Figure 4-From whisper to weapon: Gossip as statecraft in Kautilya's Arthasāstra.

If whispers could destroy reputations within families and courts, they could also be deliberately harnessed in statecraft. Nowhere is this clearer than in Kautilya's **Arthaśāstra**, which systematically incorporated gossip into intelligence-gathering. Rumours, especially in contexts of uncertainty, became "collective interpretations that often outlive the facts themselves" (*Giardini & Conte, 2012*), and Kautilya ensured that rulers could exploit this dynamic for political advantage.

The **Arthaśāstra** describes an elaborate espionage apparatus in which spies, disguised as ascetics, merchants, entertainers, and household servants, frequented taverns, markets, temples, and private dwellings to overhear the murmurs of subjects (*Rangarajan, 1992*). Kautilya (ca. 4th Century BCE/1992) classified spies into nine categories, each suited to particular forms of deception: the **Kapatikachatra**, a fraudulent pupil adept at reading minds; the **Udasthita**, a sham ascetic of outwardly moral bearing; the **Grhapatika**, a financially struggling householder; the **Vaidehaka**, a failed trader; the **Tapasa**, an ascetic aspirant unable to sustain austerity; the **Satrin**, posing as a classmate or colleague; the **Tiksna**, a desperado; the **Rasad**, skilled in poisons; and the **Bhiksuki**, a female mendicant.

By embedding such figures in everyday life, the state institutionalised gossip, transforming idle talk into a tool of governance. Whispers overheard in bazaars and temples became sources of political intelligence, enabling kings to anticipate threats, monitor loyalties, and legitimise authority. Far from being trivial, gossip was made into an organised instrument of surveillance and control.

Kautilya's (ca. 4th Century BCE/1992) **Arthaśāstra** offers one of the most detailed accounts of espionage in the ancient world, embedding gossip within an organised system of surveillance. The **Kapatikachatra** directed operations against individuals, while the **Udasthita** was rewarded with land and cattle in exchange for supervising other agents. Under his authority, several spies submitted reports concerning offences against the king's wealth, including embezzlement or illicit appropriation. The **Grhapatika** and **Vaidehaka** performed similar functions, infiltrating households and markets to gather rumours of financial misconduct.

The **Tapasa**, an ascetic aspirant, commanded a circle of disciples whose urban operations included palmistry and prophecy. Their activities extended beyond the city into forecasting foreign affairs (*videsa pravriti vijnanam*) and anticipating shifts in ministerial appointments.

Collectively, these five categories formed the **pañca samsthāḥ**, or “five establishments” (Saletore, 1968).

By formalising gossip into administrative categories, the Mauryan state transformed idle talk into actionable intelligence. Spies were not passive collectors of information but active participants in shaping rumour, creating narratives, and feeding them back into governance. Through this apparatus, whispers ceased to be mere social chatter and became tools of political economy, ensuring that kings ruled not only by decree but also by the unseen force of monitored conversation.

VI. Gossip as Social Regulation and Gendered Power

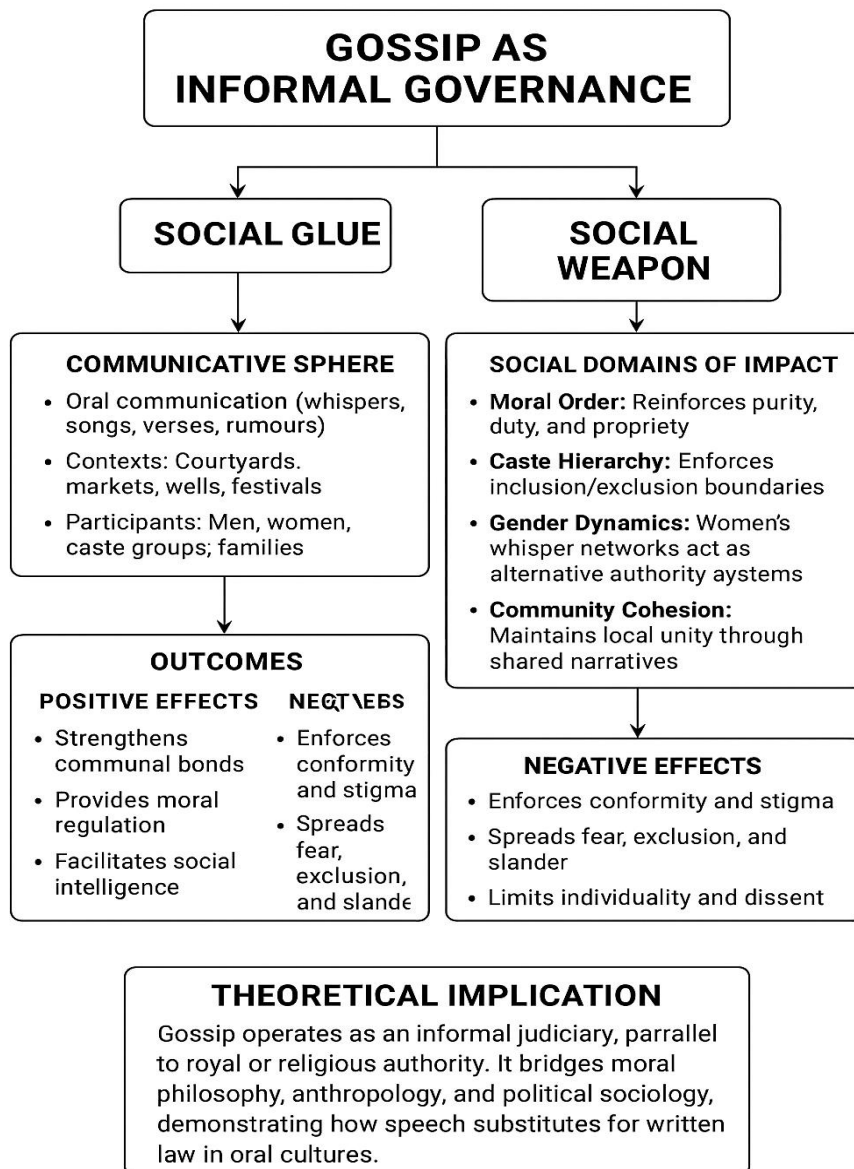


Figure 5-Gossip as informal governance.

Gossip was never merely a tool of kings; beyond the court, it acted as both social glue and weapon, regulating everyday life and enforcing moral codes. In local communities, gossip carried an authority often more immediate and tangible than distant rulers or abstract legal codes. In largely oral societies, where royal edicts or *dharmashastra* prescriptions travelled slowly, reputation became the true currency of honour. A person's standing could be constructed—or destroyed—not through official documentation but through the murmurs of neighbours, the snide remark whispered at a well, or the mocking verse sung at a festival.

Through such channels, gossip enforced caste boundaries, ritual obligations, and standards of sexual propriety with relentless vigilance. Transgressions—whether neglecting purity rules, failing in ritual duties, or engaging in forbidden liaisons—were quickly noted, repeated, and amplified until they gained the force of collective judgement.

Particularly striking is the gendered dimension of these dynamics. Excluded from formal institutions such as village assemblies, courts, and priestly offices, women cultivated dense whisper networks in courtyards, markets, water wells, and festival gatherings (Cole, 2019). Far from being idle chatter, these conversations formed an alternative system of surveillance and influence, shaping marriage negotiations, family alliances, and household reputations.

In such settings, the fear of being spoken about—whether through a casual aside or the biting lines of a satirical folk song—could discipline behaviour as effectively as any legal sanction. Gossip, therefore, was not peripheral but central to the functioning of society, mediating between abstract moral codes and lived reality, and ensuring that the community's collective voice—often articulated in whispers—remained the decisive arbiter of honour and shame.

VII. Religion, Philosophy, and the Discipline of Speech

The Ambivalent Role of Gossip in Religious and Philosophical Traditions

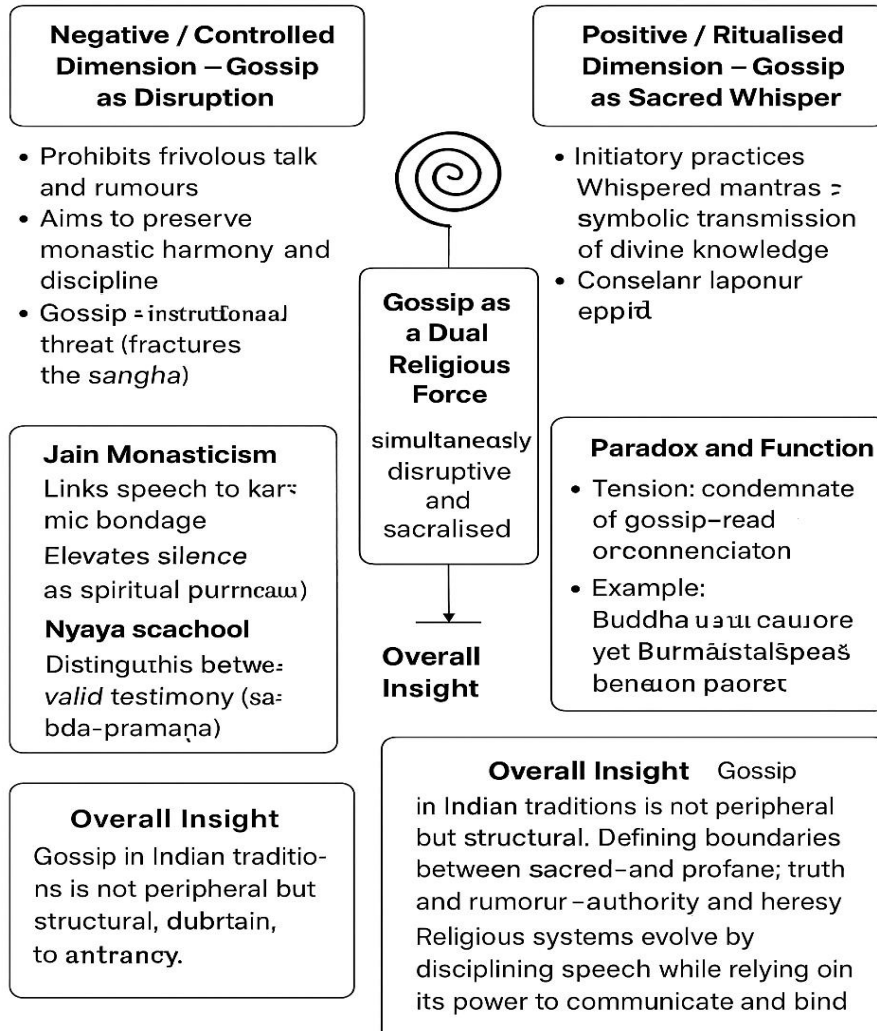


Figure 6-The ambivalent role of gossip in religious and philosophical traditions.

Just as gossip structured community life, religious and philosophical traditions grappled with its disruptive and transformative potential. Their relationship to gossip was marked by ambivalence: condemning it as dangerous when uncontrolled yet exploiting it when ritually harnessed.

In monastic contexts, gossip was policed with severity. The Buddhist *Vinaya* rules forbade frivolous talk, recognising that rumours could distract from meditation, fracture the *sangha*, and erode respect for authority. The concern was not only moral but institutional, for whispered criticisms could destabilise fragile hierarchies. Jain ascetic codes were even

stricter, linking idle words to karmic bondage and elevating silence as a mode of spiritual purity (Dundas, 2002). Yet both traditions relied on secrecy and whispering at moments of greatest significance. Initiations often required masters to whisper mantras directly into the ears of disciples, sacralising the very act of whispering as an entry into esoteric knowledge (White, 2000). This paradox—that gossip was condemned when uncontrolled but revered when ritually channelled—pervades India’s religious landscape.

Philosophical traditions further theorised the problem of speech and hearsay. The Nyāya school classified *śabda* (testimony) as a valid source of knowledge but carefully distinguished between authoritative testimony and the unreliable circulation of rumour (Picascia, 2024). This distinction reveals an acute awareness of oral culture’s instability, where unverified talk could masquerade as truth.

The Buddha himself articulated this tension with clarity. He warned disciples against relying on hearsay or inherited tradition, urging them instead to test claims through direct experience and critical reflection (Bloom, *n.d.*). Yet, ironically, the diffusion of Buddhism depended on oral circulation: miracle stories, tales of charisma, and whispered accounts of his teachings spread across villages and trade routes, extending his authority far beyond his immediate circle (Gombrich, 1988).

Thus, even as religious and philosophical traditions sought to discipline, contain, or delegitimise gossip, they simultaneously relied upon it. Gossip was not external to religion but integral to its operations—a force to be feared, managed, and strategically harnessed.

VIII. Suppressing Whispers: Alauddin Khalji’s Control of Speech

The recognition of gossip’s power was not confined to religious communities; political rulers also sought to suppress or manipulate whispers to maintain authority. The reign of Sultan Alauddin Khalji offers a striking example of authoritarian control over social communication. According to Barani, Alauddin, soon after ascending the throne, ruthlessly eliminated nobles associated with the previous reign. In the following decades, his regime imposed strict restrictions on his own officials: nobles and high-ranking officers were forbidden from visiting one another or holding private gatherings. Even invitations, social functions, and marriage arrangements required approval through the Wazir, Syed Khan. By dismantling these informal networks, Alauddin curtailed the casual conversations and rumours that had once circulated freely among the nobility. The carefree sociability of the Mamluk-era elite

was replaced by an atmosphere of mistrust and enforced discretion. This suppression of whispers reveals not only Alauddin's acute awareness of gossip's destabilising potential but also the role of state power in shaping the very texture of social life. Moreover, by controlling information, the Sultan influenced how later chroniclers, including Barani, recorded the period—demonstrating how censorship of whispers could reverberate into the historical record itself (*Ray, 2019*).

IX. Spaces of Whispers: Architecture and Mobility

Even when rulers tried to silence whispers, physical spaces often amplified them. The architecture of courts, temples, and palaces shaped how rumours travelled, how secrets were guarded, and how they could be subverted. Corridors, courtyards, and echo-prone chambers often made whispers audible to unintended audiences, transforming architecture into a medium of political and social intrigue. In royal complexes such as the palaces of Mandu or the zenanas of Agra, the very design of enclosed spaces fostered overhearing, eavesdropping, and the subtle leakage of private speech into the public realm.

Beyond palaces, everyday spaces became fertile grounds for rumour. Bustling bazaars, roadside inns, and caravan routes served as crossroads where merchants, pilgrims, and travellers exchanged stories that blurred fact and fiction. These cosmopolitan nodes facilitated a constant flow of information—accounts of distant wars, marvels, court scandals, or local disputes—that circulated with remarkable speed. Foreign observers often remarked on the velocity of oral transmission in India, noting how tales seemed to diffuse across villages and markets almost contagiously (*Trautmann, 2015*).

Mobility intensified this circulation. Traders and pilgrims carried whispers along commercial arteries, transforming gossip into a connective tissue that bound distant regions together in an oral network of news, speculation, and imagination. In this sense, space was not neutral: it actively structured how gossip functioned, whether by amplifying private words within the acoustics of courts or by diffusing them across wide geographies through the mobility of trade and pilgrimage.

X. Architecture, Acoustics, and the Circulation of Whispers

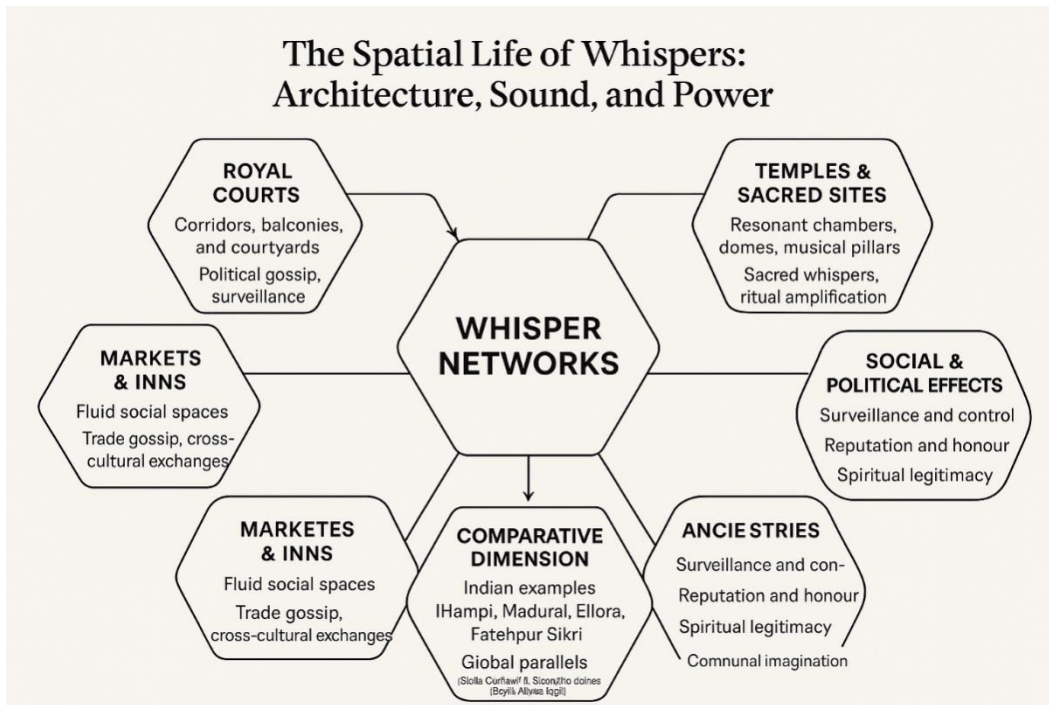


Figure 7-The spatial life of whispers: Architecture, sound, and power.

Even when rulers tried to silence whispers, physical spaces often amplified them. The very architecture of courts, temples, and palaces shaped how rumours travelled and how secrecy could be maintained or subverted.

The spatial settings in which gossip circulated were as significant as the words themselves, for place profoundly shaped both the dynamics of communication and the cultural meanings attached to it. Bustling bazaars, roadside inns, and caravan routes became fertile grounds for rumour, where merchants, pilgrims, and travellers exchanged information that blurred the line between fact and fiction. These cosmopolitan nodes of encounter facilitated a constant flow of stories—accounts of distant wars, marvels, court intrigues, or local scandals—which could be transmitted with remarkable speed across wide geographies. Indeed, foreign visitors frequently characterised India as a land where oral transmission was unusually rapid, with tales diffusing through markets and villages almost as if by contagion (Trautmann 2015). The very mobility of traders and pilgrims, who carried news along commercial arteries, made gossip a crucial medium for knitting together distant regions in an oral network of information and speculation.

Architecture in ancient and medieval India played an important role in shaping both social and auditory experiences, including the dynamics of communication within palaces, forts,

and temples. While monumental complexes were not explicitly designed for gossip or surveillance, their architectural features often created conditions in which whispers, conversations, and ritual sounds carried in distinctive ways. In palatial structures such as Mandu's Baz Bahadur Palace, the Raja Mahal at Orchha, and the Zenana quarters of Agra Fort, the combination of narrow corridors, elevated balconies, and echo-prone chambers occasionally enabled sound to travel clearly across spaces, sometimes allowing conversations to be overheard or monitored. Similarly, the courtyards of royal complexes at Hampi, Amber Fort, and Fatehpur Sikri fostered semi-public interactions where private speech and collective observation intersected.

In religious contexts, acoustic considerations were more deliberate, enhancing ritual and devotional practices. The Kailasa Temple at Ellora, the Virupaksha Temple at Hampi, the Meenakshi Amman Temple in Madurai, and the Sun Temple at Modhera employ domes, pillared corridors, and stone surfaces that reflect and amplify sound, intensifying the impact of chants and hymns. Particularly striking are the musical stone pillars, or Saptaswara Stambhas, which demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of resonance, producing distinct notes when struck. These features highlight how architecture mediated both sacred soundscapes and subtle dimensions of social interaction, situating communication—whether ritual, whispered, or communal—within carefully constructed spatial frameworks.

Global studies of acoustic architecture help to contextualize the Indian examples. Historical accounts from the Cathedral of Girgenti in Sicily, for instance, describe how whispers could be heard at nearly 250 feet across the nave, demonstrating the capacity of curved spaces to channel sound (Cox, 2014). In the seventeenth century, Athanasius Kircher illustrated similar principles through diagrams of elliptical domes that concentrate sound at focal points, making it possible for individuals to converse covertly at great distances. Later observations in large modern venues such as the Royal Albert Hall reveal the limitations of scale: while small, focused structures reinforce clear reflections conducive to whispered communication, vast halls generate time-delayed echoes that distort speech. Whispering galleries and arches—such as those at the Oyster Bar in New York's Grand Central Terminal or at the Barossa Reservoir dam in Australia—further exemplify how curved surfaces enable discreet exchanges across surprising distances. Scientific research supports these observations. Lord Rayleigh noted that high-frequency whispers tend to “creep” along walls more effectively than normal speech, increasing their audibility in curved or enclosed environments. These

architectural and acoustic phenomena were not only aesthetic or devotional but also carried social and political significance. By shaping how sound travelled, architects in both sacred and courtly contexts could privilege certain voices, conceal others, and regulate the circulation of information. In royal courts and religious complexes alike, the manipulation of soundscapes created conditions where gossip, rumour, and surveillance could thrive—underscoring the deep entanglement of space, sound, and power in history (*Childs, 2019; Cox, 2014*).

Even within the quietude of ascetic spaces, gossip persisted, though often in altered forms. Silence itself functioned as a socially potent medium. The deliberate refusal of monks to speak—a central element of spiritual discipline—not only cultivated detachment but also provoked curiosity and conjecture among lay devotees and rival ascetics. Such withdrawal could generate more rumour than speech, as surrounding communities sought to interpret the significance of stillness. In this sense, silence became paradoxically “loud,” giving rise to a surplus of interpretive discussion beyond the monastery walls.

The circulation of gossip in monastic contexts was not arbitrary but shaped by spatial and architectural design. The arrangement of cells, cloisters, and communal halls structured the movement of sound and the visibility of ascetics. Acoustic properties within these settings often amplified subtle noises, while the disciplined use of silence and monastic sign languages regulated social interaction, reinforced spiritual focus, and mediated the distribution of authority. In this way, both architecture and ascetic practice together conditioned how speech, silence, and rumour functioned in monastic life (*Johnston & Bharati, 2023; Bruce, 2007; Monastic lifestyles, n.d.*).

XI. Allegories of Gossip: Storytelling and Moral Imagination

While monumental architecture gave gossip a physical stage, India’s storytelling traditions internalised its dangers and possibilities, transforming rumours into allegories of human folly and wisdom. Didactic fables such as the Pañcatantra reveal a long-standing awareness of gossip’s disruptive and transformative potential within the literary imagination.

Many tales dramatise how a single rumour—misheard, misinterpreted, or maliciously spread—can escalate into conflict, tragedy, or social collapse. In *The Lion and the Bull*, whispered suspicions unravel trust and fracture alliances, showing how speech, once weaponised, may prove more destructive than physical force (*Olivelle, 1997*). By

externalising human behaviour into animal allegory, these stories universalise anxieties about gossip: the jackal whispering poison into the lion's ear becomes an enduring emblem of manipulation through words.

Yet these tales also acknowledge gossip's dual nature. It could protect as well as destroy, serving as a warning mechanism that revealed hidden dangers and unmasked concealed intentions. In staging animals as gossiping, conspiring, or miscommunicating, the Pañcatantra refracted human fears about unstable reputations and fragile trust into allegorical form. These literary framings underscore what history and philosophy alike suggest—that gossip was never peripheral but central to how Indians imagined power, morality, and society.

XII. Conclusion

To write about gossip in ancient India is to recover an often overlooked yet vital dimension of history, one that lies beyond the permanence of stone inscriptions or the abstractions of philosophical treatises. Where official records proclaimed ideals, victories, and cosmic order, whispers and rumours revealed the subterranean world of anxieties, rivalries, and negotiations that animated daily life.

History was not authored solely by kings, sages, and monumental architects. It was also quietly shaped by courtiers whispering behind chamber walls, women exchanging confidences at wells, ascetics spoken of in hushed tones, and merchants blending fact with fiction along caravan routes. If sound itself was central to Indian civilisation—whether in mantra, proclamation, or silence—then gossip, rumour, and whispered conversation can be understood as its most elusive yet disruptive resonance.

Circulating invisibly, gossip resisted official authority, undermined staged performances of power, and generated alternative forms of truth and memory. To recognise this is to restore to history the voices of the everyday—voices absent from copper plates and palm-leaf manuscripts, yet profoundly influential in shaping the lived experience of Indian society.

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