

“Weaving Magic: Storytelling in Chennai”

by Eric Miller, Director,
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Chennai is becoming a centre of the Global Storytelling Revival Movement! Today, almost all of Chennai's schools, children's activity centres, and summer camps include storytelling.

There is a need for a revival of storytelling, and for professional storytellers, because of social changes -- such as fewer people living together as extended families. Storytelling for children has always largely been about moral education: English-language storytelling is now also popular because it helps with teaching-and-learning spoken English.

The storytelling revival involves getting in touch with nature and communities, and with the human being inside of each one of us. Composing and telling stories helps people to find themselves. Whether it is personal experience stories from everyday life, traditional stories such as folktales and epics, or stories that we make up -- stories and storytelling connect us to the rest of nature, to each other, and to the past and future.

The storytelling revival in Tamil Nadu can be said to have begun when USA professional storyteller and author Cathy Spagnoli came to live in Chennai (she and her Tamil husband eventually re-settled in the USA). Around 1998, Cathy Spagnoli met and inspired Jeeva Raghunath, who has since earned the title, “the first Tamil professional storyteller”. Geeta Ramanujam is another South Indian pioneer of the storytelling revival. Her organisation, Kathalaya, is based in Bangalore and also does some work in Chennai.

I first came to Tamil Nadu -- from my hometown, New York City -- in 1988. At that time, to research the *Epic of the Anklet (Silappathikaram)*, I walked the path of Kannagi -- from Poompuhar to Madurai, and later to the Kerala border. Along the way, I discovered the Tamil styles of storytelling, *Villupattu (Bow Song)*, and *Kathaiyum Paattum (Story and Song)*. I went back to the USA for some years, but in 2002 I returned and settled in Tamil Nadu. In 2008 I helped to found the World Storytelling Institute in Chennai.

Just weeks ago, the WSI completed the first *Places of Kannagi Storytelling Tour* (by air-conditioned bus, over eleven days). The Tour consisted of the group visiting and participating in storytelling sessions in places Kannagi is said to have visited -- including in Valparai, the home of Mudhuvan tribal people who believe that their ancestors walked there from Madurai with Kannagi.

We recorded all of the Tour's storytelling sessions, and are editing a 20-minute movie. The movie will feature the many folktales we heard about Kannagi. For example, we heard that Kannagi sewed Kovalan's head back on with a golden needle and silver thread, bringing him back to life; however, when Kovalan continued to pay attention to Madhavi, Kannagi pulled out the thread and Kovalan's head fell off again. Another story we heard was that when Madurai was burning, Kannagi went to a place just west of Madurai; Meenakshi, the goddess of Madurai, came there to ask Kannagi to cool down and stop the burning of Madurai.

The Places of Kannagi Storytelling Tour is planned to occur annually. The Tour gives us a chance to collect many types of folktales from small villages in each of Tamil Nadu's five eco-cultural zones: seashore, agricultural land, pasture land, dry land, and mountain forest. Then we can then tell those stories -- in Tamil and English -- in Chennai and beyond.

The World Storytelling Institute holds storytelling sessions for children each Sunday morning. The WSI's next workshop for adults begins Sunday 11 April, and runs for eight consecutive Sunday afternoons.

The WSI sends storytellers it has trained to many schools and summer camps. Professional storytelling can be an ideal part-time occupation for women who have raised children and who are now seeking to enter, or re-enter, the workplace. When professional storytellers go into schools, they often perform for the children -- so having at least five or six stories, with interactive activities, in one's repertoire is a must. The storytellers may help the children to act out the stories, do story-related crafts (painting, puppets, etc), and make up and perform their own stories. Students may be helped to collect stories (including oral histories) from family and community members. Storytellers who visit schools often also give storytelling-related training to teachers in those schools.

Professional storytellers are occasionally engaged by corporations and other institutions. Storytellers can help people in these institutions to become more fully aware of the story of the institution, and to think about how they may be able to fit into and contribute to this story.

As Chennai booms and modernises, the storytelling revival here is an expression of the city's urge to keep its soul. The WSI especially collects folktales in Chennai's sea-fishing kuppams. Chennai began as a fishing village. It is hoped that the upcoming development along the coast (Lighthouse to Srinivasapuram) might include: a "Living Museum", which could feature community members explaining about sea-fishing-related objects that are still in everyday use; and weekly sessions of *Storytelling by the Sea* (by community members, professional storytellers, and others).

The WSI is helping to develop similar cultural resource centres with tribal people in Tamil Nadu's Western Mountains. These sea- and forest-related storytelling projects (at the beginning and ending places of the story of Kannagi) are related to eco-tourism: they educate, in entertaining ways, members of the public about nature. These projects involve training local people as eco-tourism storytelling tour-guides.

The natural context of Kathaiyum Paattum (Story and Song) is in the home. The senior women who tend to be the best tellers, usually would never dream of performing on a public stage, or in a classroom, or for visitors. Nonetheless, it is part of the storytelling revival to help to present this art in public.

In creating or choosing stories to be told to mixed audiences, tellers may decide to modify elements of stories. For example, traditional stories may have grown out of particular religions, but a storyteller may at times wish to universalise the appeal of a story.

Storytelling activity in Chennai and vicinity also includes:

Hanne de Bruin, originally from Holland, facilitates a Kattaikuttu School, near Kancheepuram (Kattaikuttu and Therukuttu are similar forms of folk theatre). Numerous international storytellers have come to work with the children there, including members of the Vayu Naidu Storytelling Theatre Company (based in London).

Dakshin Chitra, Hippocampus, and the Prakriti Foundation regularly organise storytelling events for children. Storytelling is inevitably part of Bhanumathi's Pavai Centre for Puppetry. For years, Krishna Iyer and her team have presented an annual audience participation Sing Along event. Tulika Publishers and Tara Books are among Chennai's book publishers who have worked with stories and storytellers.

On the adult side: Chennai's Koothupattarai Theatre Company has worked with storytellers from abroad, Evam Entertainment has offered storytelling workshops for adults, and the National Folklore Support Centre has presented programmes with and about traditional Tamil storytellers. The Tamil Nadu Eyal Isai Nataka Manram is an important resource for information about traditional storytellers around the state.

In the last two years, the WSI has hosted Chennai visits from USA storytellers Robert and Nancy (Eth-Noh-Tec), Diane Wolkstein, and Ruth Stotter. Chennai's Anita Ratnam has developed an interest in storytelling, developing a collaboration with Diane Wolkstein and giving some storytelling and movement classes for children in Chennai.

Subbu Arumugam continues his wonderful work of applying *Villupattu* to social education -- a process begun by his guru, NS Krishnan. Subbu's son, Gandhi, is poised to continue this tradition. In the field of *Katha Kalak Chebam (Harikatha)*, a devotional and classical style of storytelling, Vishaka Hari has become very popular, bringing new life to this ancient art.

This year's *Chennai Sangamam* included storytelling at each of the Festival's 14 locations. It would be wonderful if this trend might continue and grow, even involving bringing storytellers to Chennai for the week. The WSI produced one event for Chennai Sangamam this year, near the Lighthouse. As people told stories in Tamil, some of the words were projected in English on a large screen on one side of the stage. This overcame the language barrier to some degree.

These days, some storytellers accompany their storytelling with images from laptop computers, projected onto a screen. This is a continuation of the ancient tradition of showing paintings as one tells. Also, many people place recordings of their storytelling on Youtube. When translating storytelling to TV -- and at present I am consulting for a storytelling show for Tamil television -- it is a challenge to keep intact storytelling's immediacy and sense of personal connection between teller and listeners.

In my original hometown of NYC, an organisation called The Moth organises monthly autobiographical storytelling sessions in coffee shops and such, on different topics, and for different groups. I am hoping that something like this might catch on in Chennai also, because as a city grows, its citizens can become more isolated from each other, and regular informal storytelling events can give people opportunities to meet, and to develop shared interests.

The proliferation in Chennai of production companies and educational institutions involved with 3D animation, cinema special visual effects, and computer-video-Internet games, is related to the excitement about storytelling in Chennai. For

example, at ICAT (Image College for Animation, Arts, and Technology), I teach story composition and development, that is, screenplay writing. *Kung Fu Panda* really opened our eyes about how research about an Asian culture can be packaged into animated world-wide hit movie. Strictly-speaking, making movies is not storytelling (storytelling requires a live audience) -- but game-playing and other participation in online 3D virtual communities and social networks, in which one may represent oneself with an avatar (a 2D or 3D image) can involve role-playing, and this has a lot in common with storytelling.

The eagerly awaited 3G wireless telecommunication networks will make mobile video calling (videoconferencing) a feature of everyday life. This will enable, from anywhere to anywhere, videoconferenced performance of, discussion about, and training in various forms of storytelling. Already, the WSI often conducts international storytelling workshops via Skype videoconference on personal computers. Involvement with Tamil storytelling -- in person or via videoconference -- is an excellent way for Tamil people around the world to stay in touch with Tamil Nadu.

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