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Telling effect



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Master storyteller Eric Miller says how the art of storytelling is an effective communicative tool to solve day-to-day problems

From age old ‘*paati kathais*’ (grandma’s stories) to public performances like *villu paatu* and *katha kalakshepam*, every discourse in our country is a kind of storytelling. “Storytelling is more about body and voice. It creates a cathartic effect on the listeners,” says Eric Miller, Director, World Storytelling Institute.

He was in Madurai for a workshop organised by the Study Centre for Indian Literature in English and Translation to kick-start the centenary celebrations of the Daniel Poor Memorial Library of The American College. “It is only natural to organise such function in the library. In US, regular storytelling sessions for children are organised in the libraries to cultivate reading habit,” he says.

Fascinated by the *Silappathikaram* and the deep rooted storytelling culture, Eric Miller came to Chennai three decades ago to study the verbal arts that included *kathaiyum pattum* performances and traditional storytelling techniques. “People in the West think all Indian epics are about gods and goddesses but after reading *Silappathikaram*, I was pleasantly surprised to discover that the story is about humans and criticises State power and military. It is, in fact, an usual theme, quite anti-epic and that is what makes it interesting,” he says.

After coming to India, Eric visited the places travelled by Kannagi, the protagonist and also met members of the fishing community in Poompuhar, from where he started the journey and traversed different landscapes from sea shore to farm lands of Madurai to hilly terrain of Valparai. He met the Muduvan tribal people, who believed their ancestors advised the Pandia King not to punish Kovalan. It did not happen and subsequently when the city was burnt, they joined hands with Kannagi. “Even today they say that Kannagi educated them to drape sari and construct thatches,” says Eric, who now takes people on the Kannagi trail.

As part of his research he visited several parts of south Tamil Nadu and adjoining Kerala border to learn about the storytelling practices of Kani tribe. He was fascinated both by the grandmother stories and their songs and games, which he says, help children develop language skills through repetition. “Now I can also speak Kani bhasha,” he laughs.

According to Eric, storytelling is a stagecraft that involves public speaking and acting skills. “When you are a storyteller, you are both the character of your story and the narrator. You switch back and forth but most prefer to do only narration and don’t realise that it can be an effective communicative tool,” he points out.

Eric Miller is now a sought after person among human resource professionals. He works with employees to enhance their communication and soft skills. His trainees practice telling interesting stories about their life, eye opening experiences and what happened to them during the day. “It is all about remembering incidents and shaping them into a story. Just think of a character who wants to do something. List out the hurdles he may have to face to achieve the target and how can he overcome the obstacles to succeed in his mission. Once you are in the exploration mode, you will devise your own strategies and that will make you articulate better,” he says.

He educates students in different animation institutes as well. “I know nothing about video games. I just teach them how they can incorporate story telling techniques in the games,” he says. Eric Miller also works with professionals in screenplay writing and has written a script titled ‘Words from the Forest’. “It is about six teenagers from US who visit tribal areas of Tamil Nadu and learn about a special flower that can heal people of strange illness. Where they find the flower and take it to their country is the rest of the story. I intend to make it into a film for people who dream visiting Indian jungles,” he says of his dream project.

In an attempt to perpetuate storytelling as an art, Eric started the World Storytelling Institute in Chennai and has been regularly organising storytelling events. “It is an open mike. Audience are invited to tell stories. Last month it was about big rain and floods. The event also focussed on festivals like Christmas and New Year. Generally in such sessions, the storyteller would stop in the middle and ask a person in the audience if he were in that position what would he do and that completes the transformation of a mute spectator into an active participant.

Storytelling too has a therapeutic effect, like music and drama. Eric Miller is a member of a community that is developing this art as therapy for different kinds of illnesses. Ancient storytelling traditions like the *paati kathais* give comfort and inspire people.

FACTFILE

Eric Miller's Institute is organising Chennai Storytelling Festival from February 5 to 14 that includes workshops and performances for college students (on February 12) and adults (on February 13 and 14). Admission is free for college students. More than 22 trainers from Chennai, Bangalore, Hyderabad, Canada and California will participate. He is also part of the global storytelling revival to stem the gradual dwindling of oral tradition. After his workshop in Coimbatore last year, the participants have come together to form Coimbatore Storytelling Association and are planning a festival in the city. Similarly, he is planning to start Madurai Storytelling Association with the participants who attended the Madurai workshop.

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