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Age old art of story telling gets a makeover: resonates from corporate clients to children

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From creating awareness among children about current issues to selling an idea to a corporate client, storytelling has undergone a massive makeover to regain resonance and relevance



Darjeeling-based Immaker Minket Lepcha organises storytelling workshops for children to create awareness among them about the environment

It is not uncommon to mistake Anup Sharma for another corporate professional. The 46-year-old communication and public relations consultant from Delhi has till date handled multiple corporate clients, trade organisations, political leaders, as well as curated literary events and talk shows. Ask him about the common ground between all these activities and his one-word response is 'storytelling'. "It's funny how people get curious when I tell them I am a storyteller. I have to show them my Twitter handle and business card, which mention this credential. I can talk ad nauseam, put across a point through a tale and sell an idea. That's the kind of storyteller I am," says Sharma, a senior director with Delhi-based Public Relations Consultants Association of India.

Sharma is also an adviser with three public relations and policy firms in Delhi, Mumbai and Patna, respectively, and is a consultant with the World Bank. He believes it's all about creating meaningful content to attract the attention of consumers. "We have to understand that our objective is rapidly shifting from telling people our stories to empowering customers to tell the story for us," he says.



Schoolchildren at a storytelling session organised by Kathalaya Trust

Sharma is among a growing breed of professionals who have found succour in being storytellers. While he weaves stories to capture the attention of corporate clients, Minket Lepcha, a 35-year-old Immaker from Darjeeling, has been telling stories to children to create awareness about the environment.



An artiste performs at the Kathakar: International Storytellers Festival, which showcases different forms of storytelling

“Through storytelling, I am able to bring them close to our culture even as we discuss grave environmental issues. Discussing about the folklore surrounding the Teesta river in Sikkim, for instance, will also bring forth the concern we should have for river pollution. So my way of storytelling is bringing folklore closer to serve a dual purpose,” she says.

own unique style of narration. For instance, Dastangoi is an art of storytelling, where there is a distinct style of narration by either one or two people. Then there are cultures where the infusion of music with storytelling is a characteristic feature that defines the way stories are narrated. Folklore is one such example of this way of storytelling.

What has changed now is the way storytelling has moved out of bedtime schedules or village chaupals on to a larger formal setting. Now, corporates are embracing storytelling workshops and children are told about issues through stories. Storytelling festivals, too, are attracting much attention, with professional storytellers taking the craft of narration to a whole new level and demanding it gets as much recognition as any other art form.

Take, for instance, Kathakar: International Storytellers Festival. In its eighth edition now, this is an initiative of three Dehradun-born sisters—Prarthana, Rachna and Shaguna Gahilote—who have transformed the art of storytelling through dramatic performances, travelling festivals and publication of books. The eighth edition of the festival, which was held in Delhi in November last year, showcased some of the little-known forms of storytelling based on the culture and history of India, UK, Greece, Africa, Russia and Iran. While the morning sessions were attended by schoolchildren, the evening sessions were for people of all age groups.

As per festival co-organiser Prarthana Gahilote, storytelling is yet to get its due. “Storytelling is an ancient art form, which is found in every culture and each part of the world, but it is yet to be recognised as a standalone art form. It’s usually put under theatre, which is a modern concept,” says Gahilote. “Kathakar celebrates this ancient art, opens up a dialogue on how to revive it and include it in mainstream culture,” she adds. Festivals like Kathakar are growing in number, highlighting their popularity among new-age audiences.

Then there is Udaipur Tales, an international storytelling festival, which brings diverse storytelling practices on one platform through artistes, authors and journalists from across the world. The second edition of the three-day festival, which concluded in Udaipur in December last year, had 30 artistes from across the world present stories in English, Hindi and Urdu through song, dance, mono acts and spirited narration. “The idea was to build a space where people from all walks of life could come to share stories, tales or legends from the past, present and/or the future and encourage the first form of theatre, journalism and entertainment—the oral tradition of storytelling,” says Salil Singh Bhandari, creative director, Udaipur Tales. Between the first and second edition of Udaipur Tales, the creators conducted many [mini](#) chapters of storytelling in Delhi and Udaipur to warm up the environment. “We had close to 5,000 people, including kids, turning up on a daily basis at Udaipur Tales. The number certainly went up from last time, which was between 2,000 and 3,000-odd people,” Singh adds.

Storytelling has seen many phases through human history, from its first form, which was the oral tradition, to today, where it has taken different forms such as film, theatre, web series, photo stories, etc. Technology has allowed people to narrate stories in different ways and forms, but the main aspects of any story remain the storyteller and the audience. “The idea is that a storyteller tells stories directly to his/her audience. That interaction between the teller and the listener is what makes the oral tradition so effective,” says Singh.

Weaving a tale

People with a passion for telling stories are taking it forward as a full-fledged occupation. New Yorker Eric Miller settled in Chennai, Tamil Nadu, after being swayed by the storytelling tradition of the southern state. With a PhD in folklore from the University of Pennsylvania, Miller co-founded the World Storytelling Institute in Chennai in 2007, where he trains people in storytelling and conducts research on the evolution of storytelling. He also organises the Chennai Storytelling Festival, which showcases the use of storytelling in business environments, education, tourism and as a form of therapy.

Geeta Ramanujan is another leading force of the storytelling world. The 61-year-old Bengaluru resident founded Kathalaya Trust to revive the traditional art of storytelling and has been using stories as a learning tool both in schools and corporate organisations in India. “Since childhood, I was always curious and fascinated about the world around me. I grew up listening to stories from my parents, as well as at religious discourses. So when I became a teacher and librarian, I used the tool of storytelling to make concepts and subjects interesting for children in schools,” Ramanujam says. Kathalaya, which became globally recognised as International Academy of Storytelling in 2003—has till date organised seven storytelling festivals—the latest one, Kathothesava 2018, was held to honour their 20-year journey.

“Our programmes are customised for schools, NGOs, corporates, storytelling courses, workshops, events and storytelling festivals. Our main specialisation has been training. We have so far trained over 85,000 people in this field through workshops and courses in both India and abroad. Kathalaya also has franchises (14 centres) across the world, where our professionally-certified trainers double up as both trainers and owners of these centres,” she adds.

Medium to connect

Darjeeling-based filmmaker Lepcha, who quit her advertising job in Delhi and moved to Darjeeling in 2012 to document the lives of the people of her community, believes that in this technological era, mixing digital with folklore is the best way forward. “The Lepcha community is vanishing and so are our stories and traditions. I felt I needed to do something,” she says. She started out as a language teacher, became a filmmaker and now is a storyteller as well. “Since I was a teacher and then a filmmaker, I realised that stories are a medium to connect. And connecting with kids at a young age helps in spreading the right message,” says Lepcha, whose film *Voices of Teesta* won the Young Green Filmmaker Award at the Woodpecker International Film Festival in Delhi. It chronicles the lives of people who live along the Teesta and how it has changed due to numerous dams being built in Sikkim and West Bengal.

After all, it's stories that hold people together. “A storyteller has the unique power and ability to shape the mind of a listener whether it's a child or adult. This surpasses cultures, political and religious boundaries and transports the listeners to a different world,” says Ramanujam. For a storyteller, the message is the medium.

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