

MAGAZINE

## A twist in the tale

**Swati Daftuar**

JULY 06, 2013 19:39 IST

UPDATED: JULY 06, 2013 19:46 IST

**Storytelling is no longer just about entertaining children. It is now used, in different contexts, to teach and train grown-ups.**

“Animals do not tell stories to each other. Humans do. That is how we make sense of the world. So storytelling is essential to being human. Everyone tells stories...We are just not aware of it”, says mythologist and author Devdutt Pattanaik.

# THE HINDU

and brave gods, of stories with carefully masked deities and demons, of cunning anecdotes and gruesome monsters. We have always loved a good story, and we've always had storytellers. But, from then to now, the face of storytelling and storytellers has morphed and evolved into something more commercial and professional, but also less localised and farther reaching than ever before.

In the face of rapid urbanisation, mushrooming malls and multiplexes, this ancient art form is somehow making rapid inroads. The Indian storytelling revival has come of age. Stories are no longer just what you hear on lazy afternoons at your grandmother's house.

In the late 1960s, the Global Storytelling Revival began, with people trying to connect and associate with the past and the present. This involved finding and exploring heritage, identifying with one another and, of course, some good old-fashioned entertainment. Today, India has also joined the movement with its own personal rendition of the revival. With its already rich culture and heritage, and hundreds of traditional storytelling styles and traditions – villu pattu, bommalaatam, phad, chitrakatha and harikatha, to name just a few – the revival has brought together old forms and new applications to storytelling. Efforts made both by the government as well as NGOs, institutes, groups and private players have helped revive and transform storytelling.

Brought on by the revival is also a new and exciting phenomenon – that of professional storytellers. We are in an age where professional storytelling is a legitimate, accepted career choice. Today, there are institutes and colleges that will take you in and teach you to tell wonderful effective stories, and then send you off into the world to actually earn your livelihood by this art.

The Chennai-based World Storytelling Institute, co-founded by Eric Miller and Magdalene Jeyarathnam, is one such example. A veritable home for professional storytellers, the

# THE HINDU

use of both the digital as well as the traditional platforms. The institute holds workshops that use storytelling for therapy, healing, environmental issues, educational purposes and countless other projects. Its workshops play with different ideas and forms of storytelling. One striking example is of workshops dealing with animal stories where every animal featuring in a story is supposed to represent an aspect of the human personality (a fox and his cunning, a lion and his fairness, a horse and his loyalty). The institute also has sessions that specifically retell and discuss episodes from an epic. Every story has a purpose, and participants attending the workshop take away everything from management skills to moral lessons.

While The World Storytelling Institute uses both traditional and digital methods to practise and teach professional storytelling, Geetha Ramanujam's Kathalaya, in Bangalore, keeps the art form free of digitalisation. Ramanujam, the Director of Kathalaya, believes that the storytelling baton has not yet been passed permanently from bards and folk artists to bloggers and the twitterverse. "It is possible for professional storytellers to stick to the traditional art form and still keep it interesting. When I make presentations myself, I don't use power points and multimedia, but the reception has always been great. At Kathalaya, I've tried to make sure that we keep the old ways of storytelling alive. And it does work. We have hundreds of interested people approaching us for workshops in both personal and professional storytelling."

Together Geetha Ramanujam and Eric Miller have founded The Indian Storytelling Network, an online portal and confluence inspired by the International Storytelling Network based in Spain and marking the Indian chapter of the Global Storytelling Revival. The Network, in communication with other storytelling organisations around the world, facilitates and assists storytellers as well as festivals and conferences. Its goals focus on reviving and building upon the country's storytelling traditions and acting as a bridge between performers, trainers and audience.

A professional storyteller has myriad options available to him/her today. The art form isn't just a source of entertainment any more. From schools and colleges to multinational companies and NGOs, stories have found a place in previously unthinkable places. Management trainees, business experts and educational institutes are fast discovering the benefits of storytelling. "It's always more interesting to learn something through a story instead of mugging up dry facts. And if it's told in an interesting way, stories can stick with you longer than any academic or instructive lecture," says Priyanjalee, a management trainee who has attended workshops organised by Kathalaya. Professional storytelling has indeed complemented learning in a number of contexts, both professional and social. With a little rearrangement, a makeover and a brand new outfit, storytelling isn't just a way to pass the time of the day anymore. It's a very useful tool with corporate, humanitarian,

# THE HINDU

explored with this added qualification actually giving trained professionals a leg up.

There are certain key requirements for a professional storyteller. The idea behind professional storytelling involves not only effective communication but also the need to engage, inspire and motivate the listener. The qualities at once help the audience as well as the storyteller become a better trainer, speaker and communicator. For example, in management storytelling workshops, the idea is for a leader to illustrate a better future for the company via stories that might not directly involve a corporate setting, but still includes lessons that benefit one in a corporate environment. One of the more popular stories that work in a corporate setting happens to be the simple, yet ingenious, fable of the hare and the tortoise.

After years of being recognised as a source of entertainment, storytelling is now being viewed as a powerful tool for change and the overall development of an individual's personality, as well as an effective method to address social issues. At once informative, educational and entertaining, professional storytelling is becoming a regular feature at schools, as it is both effective and captures the interest of students, explaining concepts faster than regular textbooks might.

On storytelling's modern-day reiteration, Jeeva Raghunath, a professional storyteller and one of the pioneers of the movement in Tamil Nadu, says, "What happened within four walls of a house first spread and became a community event. Then, when it turned professional, it became a trade. Now the demand has turned it into a contemporary skill that is required in many fields like therapy, corporate, education, communication, and presentation. Basically, with changing times, due to the lack of comprehension of the old art form, contemporary storytelling has indulged in taking storytelling to another level. Storytelling is turning into a rare but growing commodity and storytellers are becoming brands."

Jeeva believes that adapting itself to changing mediums is a healthy trend. "Today's contemporary telling is very different from the traditional styles. Similarly, the digital medium is yet another development; the only difference being the bonding that can happen only in live shows. This change is healthy but just lacks bonding and to a certain extent the stimulation of imagination". Pattanaik, on the other hand, believes that while the medium might have changed, the human being has not. "I don't see any real difference. If anything, now we have more versions of the same story and that confuses us. We wonder what is true," he says.

Today, small and big institutes and groups of professional storytellers are reviving traditions that would otherwise have been long forgotten. For example, Dastangoi, the ancient Urdu storytelling tradition that involved oral narration, was revived by Mahmood Farooqui and Danish Husain in 2005 in the capital. Today, their performances showcasing

# THE HINDU

popular and well appreciated across the country and abroad. Farooq and Husain have also adapted modern issues and subjects into Dastangoi performances, and their Dastan-e-Sedition or the Tale of sedition was a tribute to Dr. Binayak Sen, conceived during the period of his incarceration and the public outcry against it. The performance was also a part of the Free Binayak Sen campaign held in New Delhi in April 2011.

Acoustic Traditional, founded by Salil Mukhia and Barkha Henry, is another non-profit organisation started to revive and promote storytelling traditions like oral storytelling and tribal folklore, especially of mountain and forest-based communities. Started as a classroom project in Nepal, the organisation is now based in Bangalore. The goal is to preserve the myths, legends and stories of tribal groups, as well as to use these to connect to mainstream communities. Acoustic Traditional holds The Annual Festival of Indigenous Storytellers along with regular storytelling sessions and workshops.

There is a lot that a story can do. It can affect individuals, or masses. It can bring reform and it can bring joy. It can be used to manipulate public opinion and it can spread misinformation and terror. Clearly, that is a fair amount of responsibility for a storyteller to take on. "Today, storytelling is also used as propaganda to shape people's political views, as advertising to shape buying behaviour. So what has changed is that we now have an agenda that drives our story. We don't narrate it innocently, unaware of the underlying thoughts or agenda. It tells us that some products and some services are better than others; it tells us who our heroes should be and who our villains are; they essentially shape the mind of the person who is listening" says Pattanaik.

Whether they use traditional or modern methods; whether they make twitter or a stage their platform, professional storytellers have carved a space for themselves. Skills you couldn't learn in the classroom, lessons that chapters in your books couldn't teach you, stories can. Engineering students, children with special needs, prisoners; stories can touch everyone and anyone who is ready to listen, to see and understand.

***Why you should pay for quality journalism - [Click to know more](#)***

Printable version | Dec 26, 2019 1:09:26 AM |

<https://www.thehindu.com/features/magazine/a-twist-in-the-tale/article4884125.ece>

© THG PUBLISHING PVT LTD.

---