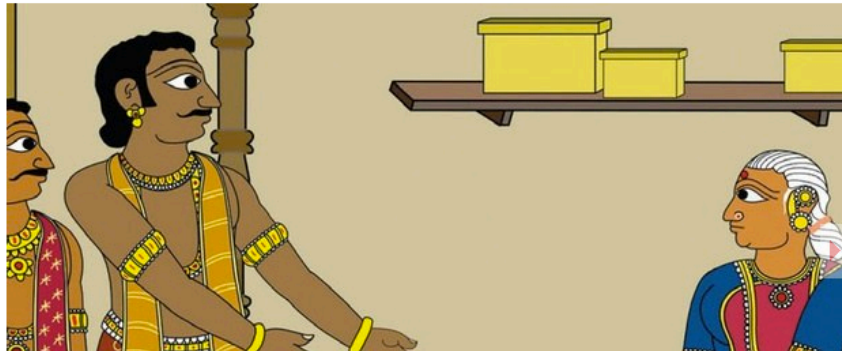


■ Taking Kongu Tales to Toronto Schools

By Archita Suryanarayanan | Published: 12th February 2015 06:00 AM
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CHENNAI: Globalisation is not just about American fast food brands McDonald's and KFC coming to India, but also students in Toronto eagerly devouring the story of Ponnar Shankar from the Kongu region of Tamil Nadu.

It is now 50 years since Canadian scholar Brenda Beck began her journey with Annanmar Kathai. She first heard the folktale of Ponnar Shankar from a travelling bard in the village of Olapalayam. Now, the folktale has been made into a comprehensive book, a graphic novel and a 26-episode animated series besides a teaching module in Canadian schools, thanks to Beck.

It all began when Beck was 14, travelling the world including countries like Syria, Afghanistan and Turkey besides India, for a year with her father. It was when her family camped at Dhanushkodi that she fell in love with Tamil Nadu. Ten years later, she came back to the State to do her doctoral research. "It was on a full moon night that I first heard the sound of drums. I was living at Olapalayam then and the whole village had gathered to listen to a storyteller. I joined them too. I heard the story for 18 nights — a total of 44 hours. I could not follow Tamil completely, but I could see the expressions, gestures, rhythms and accidental shadows on a white wall behind," she recalls.

After recording the entire story on tapes, Beck translated it and got it published into a book. This was followed by illustrations, comics and video series. The story is now being taught in many schools in Canada.



Ponnar Shankar includes tales of geographical conflict, fight for land between first settlers and newcomers, gender conflicts and relationships between brothers. Like the epic Mahabharata, Ponnar Shankar also focuses on the grey area between the good and bad, heroes who are not heroes and villains who are not villains.

The story revolves around three generations and spans across six centuries. It starts with the story of farmer Kollata, who dies leaving his son Kunnutaiyya orphaned. Kunnutaiyya, whose is abandoned by Kollata's father's brothers, later returns to Ponnivala with his wife Tamarai to claim the land. The couple has three children, Ponnar, Shankar and a daughter Tungal. The brothers grow up to be warriors, and their story is popular throughout Kongu Nadu as Annanmar Swamigal. The family is considered to be from the Kongu Vellalar community.

Is it fiction or history? "That depends on what is fiction and what is history," says Beck with a laugh. "Each character reflects the historic period of the Kongu region. In those centuries, history was not written in textbooks, but sung by bards. A lot of historical narrative can be understood from this tale," she says.

While there are different interpretations of the story, what's important is the universality of the story — the eternal conflict for land between the original settlers and the newcomers is relevant to people from any part of the world.

Now, Beck is in Tamil Nadu to tell the story of Ponnivala that is not known much outside of the Kongu region. Her work can be explored at www.ponnivala.com