

The primal art

Storytelling is coming alive thanks to a newfound faith in its restorative abilities

By Gayatri Jayaraman



Jerry Pinto at the National Centre for the Performing Arts book club. Photo: Parikshit Rao/TimeOut Mumbai

Every day at 9pm, a man climbs to the roof of his small hut, about 100km from Bikaner in Rajasthan, straining to hear a story being told across the airwaves. It is the only place where he can get a clear radio signal for Neelesh Misra's radio show *Yaadon ka Idiot Box*, on Big FM, relayed in 35 towns and cities. It's an image, along with many others, that Misra keeps in mind as he spins his yarns every night.

In an age of brief attention spans, when technology has made brevity a virtue, the storyteller is reclaiming the tale.

In Meghalaya, Namrata Rimjah is nervous. She is a Champion, or a volunteer storyteller, with the non-governmental organization (NGO) Pratham Books, whose tag line is "A book in every child's hand". She has spent the last week trying to organize the logistics for a day of storytelling. It's never been done in Shillong before, so there is no conventional space. How does one gather the children, and how will they react to it, she wonders.

For a nation once steeped in oral traditions, it's a mass effort towards

rediscovery.

Today, International Literacy Day, Pratham Books is organizing a nationwide event in which 250 Champions across states will tell the story *Susheela's Kolams* (published by Pratham Books) to groups of children typically aged 4-13. Stories will be told in multiple languages and with no specific rules. "Because of this, one story has the potential to become 250 different stories," Purvi Shah, Pratham Books' brand manager, says.

Unlike a book, which must be told in one way, a story is just a seed. Neela Gupta, Pratham Books' Champion in Vadodara, Gujarat, who retired after over 30 years as a librarian in various institutes, has dedicated herself to helping children read. Gupta will be reading today, but sometimes she just walks around the city with books, sits down wherever she finds children and reads out a story to them. "A lot of children have never seen a book, textbooks maybe, but not colourful storybooks. If they have one, no one has read it to them. When you tell a story, it comes alive to them. It is magic," she says.

A week after she first held such a session, the children showed up at her home shyly asking her for a book. Gupta has since been inspired to try and start a library of her own.

Stories are primal and transformative tools. Psychologists call them schemas: cognitive mental maps. They are that by which the human mind puts its world view in order. According to a study conducted at Princeton University, US, in 2010 (*Speaker-listener Neural Coupling Underlies Successful Communication* by G.J. Stephens, L.J. Silbert and U. Hasson; Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, US), people's brains synchronize when a story is told.

It's about a deeper spark. As Suzanne Singh, managing trustee for Pratham Books, puts it: "It's not just about reading a book, a child has to want to read and for that something has to be ignited within him. That can only be achieved by hearing a story told."

Author Jerry Pinto tells stories to anyone who will listen. "A story is the essence of being human. First, it relies on some common ground knowledge of the rules. The child knows that it is false in some ways but in other ways, it reaches a deeper level of truth. Then it uses language and memory. Memory is central to art, hence the position of Mnemosyne as the chief muse. Then, the storyteller only uses words; the child must patch everything else in and when a child is truly involved, you can see a world take birth behind her or his eyes. Finally, language, and what a rich resource that is."

Pinto recalls his mother reading to him: “She read well, without histrionics or acting. She let the words do the work. But now that I look back, it wasn’t about the stories or her reading of them. It was about love.”

This is also why you do not have to be trained to tell a story, or indeed, to be moved by one. In Kolhapur, Maharashtra, a middle-class couple, Hema and Rajesh Ahuja, made an unlikely friend in German professional storyteller Christine Lander last year. Rajesh says: “My wife was so moved by a well-told story that she decided to start the Institute of Creative Intelligence, a home-run organization, and we organize workshops when and where we can.”

The Ahujas’ is a small effort, travelling with storytelling workshops whenever they can on a cost-to-cost basis. They hope that one day the government will take it seriously enough to institute storytelling in schools across the country like Germany does.

But the power of stories is not for children alone. Geeta Ramanujam, executive director of Kathalaya, a storytelling institute in Bangalore and Chennai, has been a storyteller since 1998. “It has been my battle for 14 years to convince the world that it is not just children who need to be told stories, but it is adults too who must tell and be told stories.” Ramanujam primarily trains teachers and educationists to use stories to teach, using puppetry and local folk forms, often creating entire performances out of subjects. “Teaching can be monotonous for both teachers and children. Through word play, memory association, teaching sticks better. Also, storytelling is healing. It is vital in today’s IT sector-driven world where we send short emails, SMSes; we are becoming monosyllabic beings. You find people who are unable to communicate content in an exacting manner any more because they lack the skills,” Ramanujam says.

When the joint family broke up and people found themselves spending more time at their jobs, storytelling ceased to be a thing people did. Misra, brought up near Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, and in Nainital, Uttarakhand, recalls his father and grandmother telling him stories under the open sky. “Other forms of entertainment now vie for attention, people have less time to spend with each other and when they do, technology intrudes. We gained cable, but lost storytelling,” he says. *Yaadon ka Idiot Box*, which has now completed a year, reaches the border areas of Pakistan. Within the first three months, the show registered 5.5 million page views on Facebook from 19 countries—with most listeners in the 13-24 age group. They had expected an older, nostalgia-driven generation to listen in.

A new world also needs newer stories. Eric Miller, a PhD in folklore from the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, US, is director of the World Storytelling Institute based in Chennai. He conducts a Places of Kannagi Storytelling Tour in the state that traverses Chennai, Poompuhar, Madurai and travels up to the Kerala border, telling stories en route. He also links traditional storytellers like Mahabharat tellers with scholars via video conferencing and says there is a definite revival of the form. “Traditional societies were different from societies today, so genres of storytelling such as *kathaiyyum pathum* (story and a song), etc., are dwindling, but we are reinventing these genres. Traditional storytelling was often geared towards religion, modern storytelling tries to be educative and may feature the theme of nurturing nature.”

Miller says there is a trickle-down effect from human resources people, who use it as a motivational tool, to educational institutes. “Storytelling is often a core of other art forms—drama, music, dance, theatre. It has its uses in therapy. The beauty of it is anyone can be a great performer.”

How to tell a good story

Neelesh Misra gives you a crash course

Stories have to have an emotional core. The wallpaper—the exterior, how you decorate it—may change, but the core has to be emotion.

- Do not have a lot of characters. Have one central character that people can relate to.
- Don’t look for one grand moment. Fill it with many small moments so people have to keep attuned. People have short attention spans.
- Don’t give me information, give me experience. Don’t tell me someone is lonely. Tell me she went home, opened the fridge and saw only a slice of day-before-yesterday’s stale pizza there and was overcome with tears.
- Use highly visual writing.

For details of Pratham Books’ storytelling events in your state today, visit <http://www.prathambooks.org/states-and-champions>