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SOCIETY

## Indian storytellers struggle to keep tradition alive

In India, rapid urbanization and globalization are allowing movies and soap operas to replace the age-old oral tradition of storytelling. But some are fighting to keep the ancient tradition alive.

At the elementary school in the village of Panayakottai in southern India, schoolchildren swarm excitedly around the visitors who have come from the city of Chennai.

In one corner of the schoolyard, a group of ladies are sitting quietly, waiting. They've been invited to share some stories with a group of folklore experts and storytellers from Chennai, who are there to study their unique style of narration.

### Story and song

One of these ladies is 80-year-old Ayyamma. Dressed in a white sari, her silver hair cropped short, Ayyamma is an energetic and enthusiastic storyteller, her quivering voice full of passion.

The schoolchildren and visitors gathered in the courtyard listen intently as Ayyamma narrates the epic of the honest king Harishandra, who leaves his kingdom, wealth and family to keep his word to a holy sage whom he had angered. For some parts of the story - for example, when one of the characters speaks - Ayyamma breaks into song.

Ayyamma's style of narration with singing is called "kathaiyum paattum," or "story and song." It's an ancient art of storytelling traditionally practiced in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu.



The "story and song" technique is particularly popular in the Tamil Nadu region

These folktales are often about kings and queens, brave hunters or clever animals. They often include moral warnings to avoid lies or theft, not to be greedy and so on. There are many different stories, and each village has its own versions. Traditionally, mothers and grandmothers narrated or sang these stories to their children and grandchildren at home.

### Listening skills

Ayyamma first heard the story of King Harishandra in one such play staged at her village many years ago. She said she enjoyed it so much, that she often sang the songs to herself. Although such theatrical plays used to be common, they are rarely performed these days.

Ayyamma said her grandchildren find the old stories she tells them too boring. "They only like the funny ones, like stories of a naughty rat," she said.

Dnyanasundari, who is 52, also has trouble getting her five-year-old grandson to listen to her stories. Her daughter's family lives in a nearby town, so she doesn't get to spend much time with him. When they visit, she said she sings lullabies to him at night - but the rest of the day, he prefers to watch television, and doesn't listen to stories.

"I keep telling my daughter not to stop this tradition of telling stories," Dnyanasundari said. She believes sharing such songs and lullabies helps small children develop listening skills.

Dnyanasundari says she has written down all the stories and songs she knows for her daughter, hoping the future generation will keep them alive.

### Lack of interest

At the Panayakottai village meeting, Bhanumathi, who is 35, shared a local legend - seven virgin goddesses who come across a jewelry vendor while bathing in the temple pond.

Bhanumathi says her enthusiasm for these stories is not shared by her three grown children, ranging from 15 to 20 in age. She thinks it's important to tell her children such stories, but "they just ridicule me, saying they don't want to hear these boring stories from my time or my parents' time."



Bhanumathi (right) said children are more interested in watching television

Bhanumathi's experience reflects a reality that is spreading fast throughout India. With satellite television making its way even to the most remote villages, TV shows and soap operas are increasingly replacing traditional modes of storytelling.

As more young people migrate to larger towns and cities to study or work, local village traditions are sidelined further. Many young people both in urban and rural settings feel out of tune with the ancient storytelling tradition.

"Our generation is not interested in listening to stories; we'd rather go to the movies," one young Tamil man told DW.

Yet this attitude is not universal - some young people see the continued value of such traditions. "If we just read it in books or on the Internet, we can't really apply those values in life. If our relatives or elders explain it to us, then we will absorb them better," said another young man.

### New uses

Ancient forms of storytelling today remain confined mostly to villages, and most of the people listening nowadays seem to be ethnologists and scholars.

Folklore expert Eric Miller led the group of visitors from the city of Chennai to Panayakottai as part of an effort to increase awareness about these storytelling forms.

Miller said traditional storytelling is still relevant in today's world as a group learning technique, where the storyteller helps the listeners identify with the characters in a story.

"It's very interesting and fun, and if they have a discussion afterwards on what the whole thing was about, then it gets people thinking and feeling," Miller said. In the end, it's "very enriching, intellectually and emotionally - I think most people who do it, enjoy it."

Miller teaches storytelling techniques to a wide range of people, including college students and businessmen. Traditional forms of storytelling are now being adapted for various fields like corporate training, language and phonetic skills and even as a counseling technique.

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(25.10.2012)

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**Author** Pia Chandavarkar / sad

**Editor** Michael Lawton

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