



The tale end of tradition

Next time someone asks you to plan a unique Indian itinerary, tell them to try a storytelling festival. An increasing number are being held in many parts of India based on our indigenous storytelling traditions. It is widely known

that our country has a rich history of oral storytelling — from *The Panchatantra* and the *Jatakas* to regional folk forms propagated by *potochitrakars* (scroll readers), *bauls*, *harikatha* and *burrakatha* bards.

Now a handful of organisations and

individuals are bringing back the joys of storytelling to the modern world through annual fests, performances and workshops. In December, the hills of Darjeeling in West Bengal saw the third edition of Confluence, an annual festival of indigenous storytellers. It was



THE ART OF STORYTELLING IS MAKING A COMEBACK TO URBAN INDIA, FINDING USE IN VARIOUS AREAS OF COMMUNICATION — FROM CORPORATE PRESENTATIONS TO THEATRE, DISCOVERS ANURADHA SENGUPTA

organised by Acoustic Traditional, an independent non-profit organisation led by young tribal people working towards the promotion of oral storytelling and tribal folklore, especially of mountain- and forest-based communities, the World Story Telling Institute of Chennai

and Alternative from Mumbai. The festival brought together tribal storytellers, stakeholders, organisations and communities under one roof to share not only their folklore but also their wealth of community knowledge, myths, legends, beliefs and practices,

especially those that spoke of the environment and its preservation. The Acoustic Traditional has been able to communicate with several indigenous communities of the eastern Himalayas for more than a decade and assemble the community folklore passed down



‘Storytelling in general is a communal act. Throughout human history, people would gather around, whether by the fire or at a tavern, and tell stories. One person would chime in, then another, and then someone would repeat something they heard but with a different spin. It’s a collective process’

— Joseph Gordon-Levitt, Actor

from their forefathers, either in written form or as visual documentation.

The event is now in its third year and attracts huge crowds, pointing to the revival of the folk tradition. In November last year, Delhi saw the hosting of Kahaani, another festival based on storytelling for children.

February saw the Chennai Storytelling Festival, which incorporated latest advances in storytelling, touching upon its use in a business environment, education and tourism. It even introduced visitors to storytelling as a form of therapy. The festival was followed by a visit to the Thanjavur area for a workshop in the traditional storytelling style known as *Kathaiyum Paattum* (story and song).

Apart from these domestic ventures, there have also been a number of storytellers visiting the country from foreign shores, like the UK storyteller Xanthe Gresham.

Indeed, the tradition is experiencing an exuberant revival in many places across the globe. Storytellers from 25 countries across Europe even met in Switzerland recently to formalise a Federation for European Storytelling.

However, in 1998, when Geeta Ramanujam set up Kathalaya, a storytelling institute in Bengaluru, she had to go to great lengths to explain her profession to people.

“Stories and storytelling are part of our oral heritage but there is no autonomous academic institute to train

aspiring storytellers as professionals," she said.

This was how Kathalaya was born, she said. "Earlier, grandparents used to play a dominant role in handing down this tradition to the youngsters of the family, narrating tales and legends to the children. There was no institutionalising of this art form. With the present socio-economic structure of society, children are drawn more towards technology, gadgets and other means of entertainment. Since the advent of television and computers, the focus has become the idiot box and the stories it shows audiences across the world. Also, parents today are too busy to take time out to communicate with their children. As a result oral storytelling all but vanished from general consciousness."

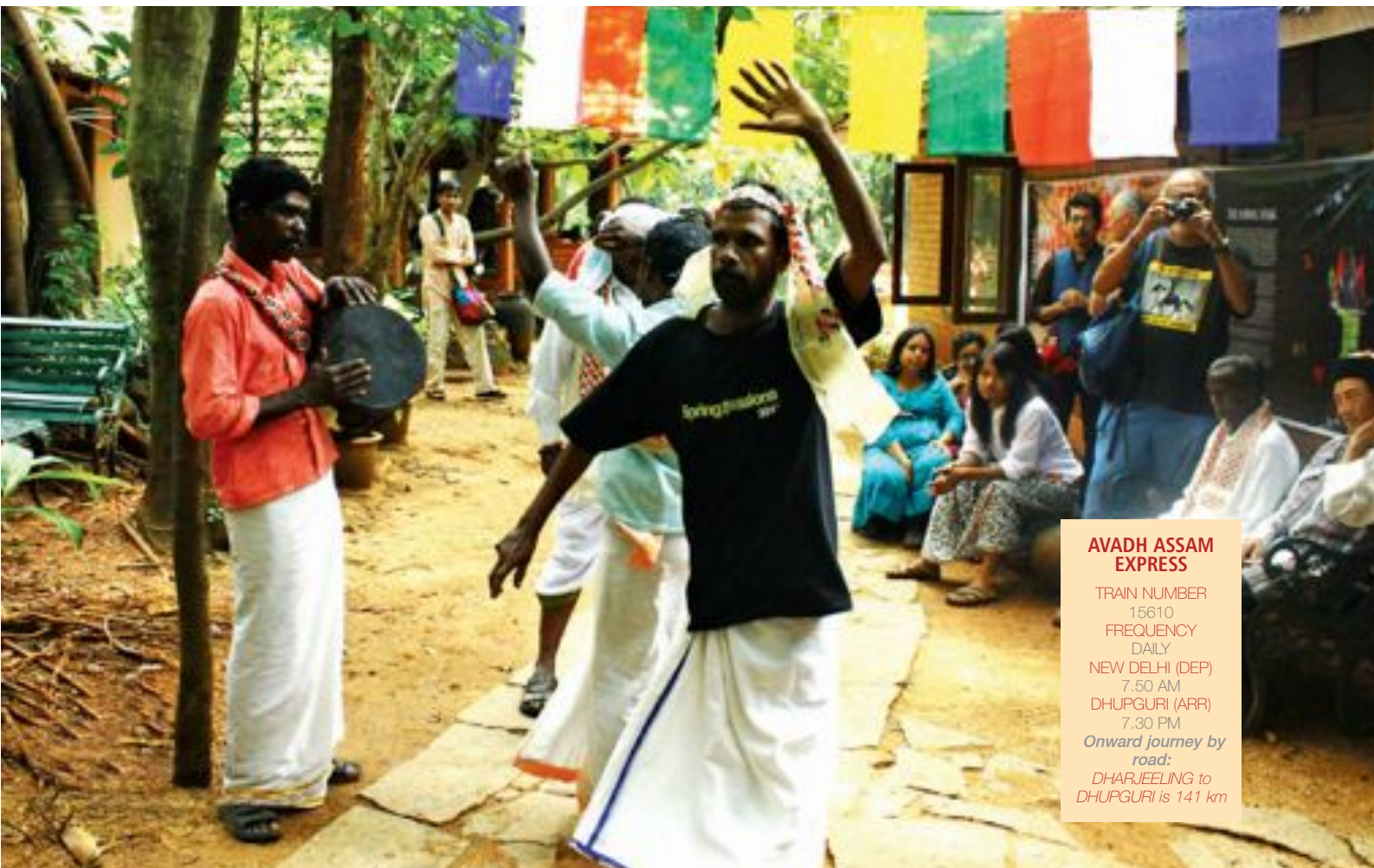
The Chennai-based World Storytelling Institute (WSI) was set up by former New Yorker Dr Eric Miller,

whose interest in storytelling goes back a long way. With a PhD in Folklore from the University of Pennsylvania, Miller, originally from New York City, settled in Chennai, where he co-founded WSI in 2007. "Many people don't even know what folklore is. It is a sub-set of cultural anthropology," he says. "I grew up surrounded by theatre, a form of storytelling, and my interest kept growing."

When people talk about storytelling, they generally mean the oral tradition — someone standing in front of a group and narrating a tale with a lot

of expression, hand movement and posturing. This form of communication was popular much before radio, television, podcasts, Facebook and Twitter became the trend. Ramanujam thinks what sets storytelling apart and makes it more accessible is its relative lack of props. "It is a basic form of communication which requires you to conjure up thoughts and directly transmit them to the listener. It requires the narrator to have multiple intelligence skills and a high emotional quotient for him to get through to the listeners. It is an art that cannot be categorised. The narrator here is the constructor, the executor and the director of his stories," he said.

Miller has an interesting take on the comeback of storytelling. Human beings are far too overwhelmed with data and electronic messages today, he says, and storytelling is a way to make it manageable so we can absorb it. "It gives a sense of



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DHUPGURI (ARR)
7.30 PM

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DHARJEEING to DHUPGURI is 141 km



control over your own mind," he said.

Storytelling is no longer just about literals. From helping document and preserve vanishing languages and indigenous medicines to helping in teaching and working with corporates, it is being put to use in a number of ways. Miller has done storytelling workshops for big corporations such as Cognizant. "I help people think about their own life stories — their special talents and abilities and how they are

using them at the workplace. The setting is the story of the companies they work for, the department they work in and their industry. People are aware of the different roles in a workplace and how they fit into the roles. Through the workshops, they become aware of their own abilities and how they may work together in the future. In a very powerful way, I help them imagine a possible fantasy for their future."

This new age of storytelling is using technology to its benefit. At Confluence, for instance, participating groups

conducted a live video conference with professors of the Asia Pacific Advanced Network (APAN), in which some participating tribal storytellers had a conference with the APAN members.

Then there is the Kahaani project, which captures and shares stories in digital audio format so they can be made more accessible to the common man. The project aims to crowd-source audio stories and then distribute them either through the website or through pre-loaded MP3 players given to visually impaired children through various institutes for the blind. Anyone can contribute a story on their site.

"This new wave of storytelling is quite different from the old folk narrations in many ways, what with webinars and workshops," said Salil Mukhia Kwoica, founder and director of Acoustic Traditional. "Also, storytelling today has found new areas of usage — from effective communication and corporate presentations to theatre. Storytelling has emerged as a concept more than a tradition of simple narrative. It is at the heart of the greater human



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network, where stories could be about almost anything and not necessarily a folk tale or a fairytale."

The larger trend, though, seems to be strongest in the corporate world, where graphical communication is used as a marketing strategy that helps convey why the business or the product is special. Perhaps that's what is so interesting about storytelling — it is old and yet manages to attach itself to all innovations and new technologies.

Miller's workshops incorporate storytelling in different environments — from the corporate sector to education. In fact, when my call to Miller gets through, he is travelling back to Chennai from Pune, where he has just finished a workshop on incorporating storytelling techniques in classrooms. "I like to train teachers on how they can use storytelling in the classroom and to help children develop their own storytelling methods," he said. "It is a form of public speaking. Storytelling can also be used to enhance the take-home value of lessons — instead of just talking about how, for instance, water can turn into

vapour and vapour into ice, we can turn it into a story with characters." And he rattled off a story created around a whale to illustrate the point. "This is a much more fun way to get the idea across."

Kwoica maintains that Acoustic Traditional takes a departure here as it works to conserve indigenous "oral history" vis-à-vis stories and traditions of storytelling. It does not work on

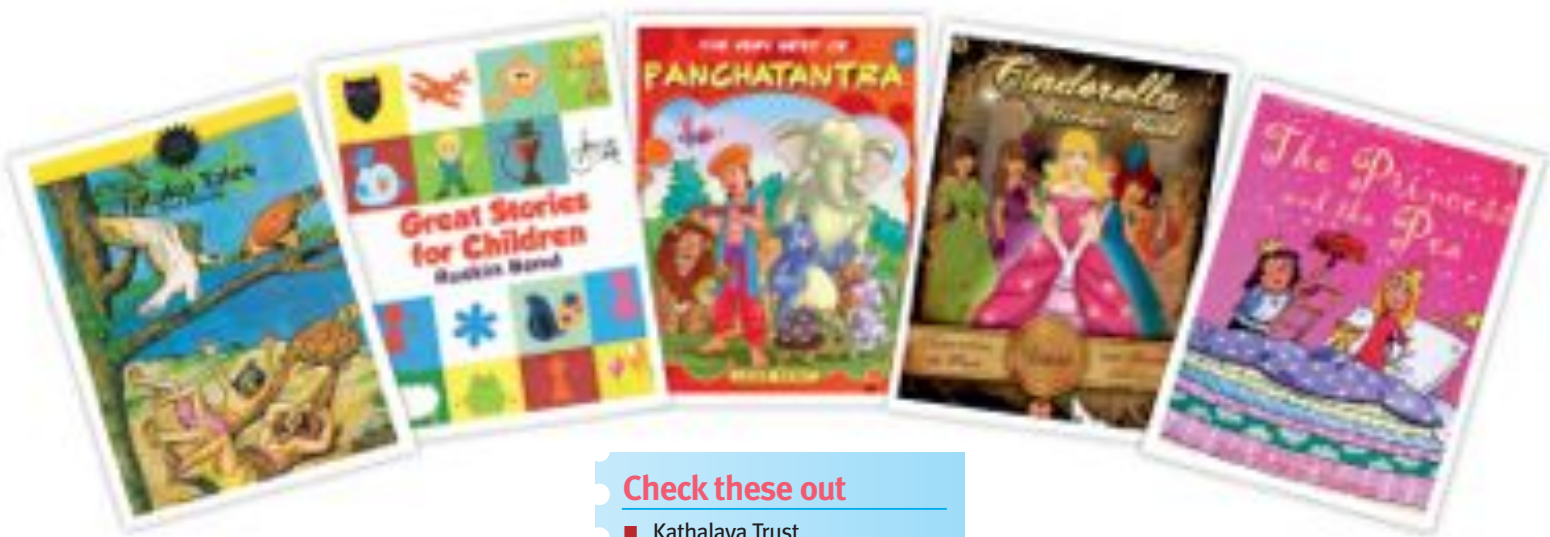
'Storytelling today has emerged as a concept more than a tradition of simple narrative. Storytelling is at the heart of the greater human network, where stories could be about almost anything and not necessarily a folk tale or a fairytale'

— *Salil Mukhia Kwoica,*
Founder, Acoustic Traditional

theatrical storytelling, where it takes the form of art. "Since it was founded and led by tribal people, Acoustic Traditional only looks at promoting tribal storytellers and *shamans* with a view to sustaining the last remaining stories of these tribes and help present generations understand their past. Storytelling has always been a means of passing down information from generation to generation and as such our focus is on documenting stories. In our work, we identify *shamans* and storytellers and make an effort to document what they know. The only way they are aware of 'oral history' is through storytelling. It's impossible for them to come forward and just start recounting history. They can only tell you stories and it is up to us to understand the history. In most cases, the *shamans* are usually the ones who know a great deal about a community's oral history and the way they recount it is enchanting and informative at once."

Acoustic Traditional also looks at





finding relevance for tribal stories in the urban context, as many of their stories have links to medicine, environment, spiritual philosophy and anthropological data.

"Tribal people have a great deal of knowledge about nature and how to live in a sustainable way. Even the *Ramayana* has mention of this. Today there's a very real danger of humanity losing this inherent knowledge which it has developed over 60,000-70,000 years. Through our projects, we want to keep this knowledge and wisdom alive."

Miller is working on projects with fishing communities along the coast and forests of Tamil Nadu that help promote sustainable tourism. "It will help people make a living from their culture," he said.

The best part about all this is that one does not have to be just a spectator, one can even join an institute for a short course or a workshop to pick up storytelling skills. Organisations like WSI and Kathalaya offer short- and long-term courses and workshops for adults and children both. These

Check these out

- Kathalaya Trust
#88, BHBCS Layout, 3rd Main,
2nd Cross, Bannerghatta Road,
Bengaluru
Ph: 080-26689856, 8277389840
Visit www.kathalaya.org
- World Storytelling Institute,
Nungambakkam, Chennai
Ph:9840394282; 044-42080890
Visit www.storytellinginstitute.org
- 75/2, Ramachandrappa
Road, Kamanahalli Main Road,
Bengaluru
Visit www.acoustictraditional.org



workshops include acting, drawing, craftmaking (in relation to storytelling), communication skills, logic, methods of research, and story and personality development — and they are getting a huge response. Ramanujam of Kathalaya, said: "Today's young parents are very particular about the way they guide their children and many parents and grandparents attend our courses to learn to be good parents at home and be able to guide their children better." He said they also get responses from professionals, corporates, NGOs, ad agencies, theatre specialists, filmmakers, young students and teachers who want to add a creative touch to their existing professions. "It is a wonderful way to break communal and linguistic barriers and transcend all borders. It is different from drama — you do not need a stage, a colour team, lights etc. You have to just tell a story to a group of people — it can be standing under a waterfall, above a mountain or under a tree. It's just about talking, hearing and being heard."

