“Aspects of the Storytelling Revival in India”

by Dr. Eric Miller
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This paper is largely based on my experience as a leader of storytelling workshops for adults over the past ten years in India, especially in Chennai, the capital of the state of Tamil Nadu, on India's southeast coast.

India is one of the world's great lands of storytelling. This is perhaps the primary reason that I have settled here (my original home was New York City). Despite all of the cultural changes that are occurring, India remains a leading home of storytelling, and an excellent place to study and practice the art.

“Storytelling” in this paper refers to a social situation during which the teller and listeners can respond to each other instantly and continuously. In movies and novels, stories are presented to people, and people experience stories, but strictly speaking, these media do not involve storytelling. In India, as elsewhere, it seems that people often do not acknowledge this distinction between storytelling, and story presentation through other media that lack the rich interactivity of storytelling.

India's society is changing rapidly:

Castes (extended kinship-networks, organised around professions and geographical areas) are slowly becoming less central to social life. Conversely, “communities of choice” -- and new technologies, professions, and working environments -- are becoming larger parts of many peoples' lives.

The shopping mall has to some degree become an urban modern-day equivalent of the village festival and market. For many people in big cities, the bookstore has become the new library. Much public space is being privatised.

For many people, the nuclear family is increasingly a reality, and the extended family is increasingly distant. Children's activity centres (for after-school and weekend activities) are opening at a rapid pace. Childcare and education that used to occur in the extended family is now increasingly being done by teachers, activity-centre staff, and professional storytellers. These storytellers are often brought in to train staff and teachers regarding ways of doing storytelling activities with children.

It is in this context that the Storytelling Revival is coming of age in India.

The global Storytelling Revival can be said to have begun in the 1960s, especially in the USA and the UK.[1] At this time in the West, there was among many people an inclination to get directly in touch with each other as human beings -- with our histories, and with nature -- and to not get so much of our entertainment from TV. The Storytelling Revival is blooming in India only now, as TV has become very prevalant here also, and as the older types of domestic and ritual storytelling are not being practiced as widely as they had been formerly.

In contrast to the individual-based roots of the Storytelling Revival in the West, in India the Storytelling Revival is in part occurring through companies that in some cases copyright, trademark, and sell franchises of, their storytelling-related educational and entertainment materials and processes.

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[1] Joseph Sobol, *The Storytellers' Journey; An American Revival*, Urbana, Illinois, USA: University of Illinois Press, 1999.

Many people in India seem to give little importance to the distinction between folk stories (stories created by communities and passed down from generation to generation); and stories created by individual authors, and education and entertainment companies.

Related to this issue is that many people in India (as elsewhere) prefer to avoid actual folk stories. This is because authentic folk stories told in conversational settings often contain strong doses of profanity, hostility between husbands and wives (and other family members), and other material often deemed unfit for children, by parents in high-caste communities, and in the middle and upper classes in general.

Numerous traditional styles of storytelling practiced throughout India involve alternation between speaking and singing. In Tamil Nadu, this is true of the genres: on the Orthodox Hindu level*, Harikatha* (*God Stories*), also known as *Katha Kalak Chebam* (*Religious Storytelling*); on the professional folk level*, Villupattu* (*Bow Songs*); and on the domestic folk level*, Kathaiyum Paattum* (*Story and Song*).

Raja-Rani Kathai (King-Queen Stories), and *Paatti Kathai* (*Grandmother Stories*) -- that is, folk tales of various types -- are told in the latter genre, *Kathaiyum Paattum*. Studying *Kathaiyum Paattum* -- and transposing some of its form and content into English -- is a great challenge and opportunity for Storytelling Revivalists in Tamil Nadu.[2]

Many traditional stories (such as epics, folktales, legends, and myths) in India have grown out of religions, and were originally told in the context of communities in which one religion pre-dominated. In such situations, one function of these stories was to teach and support the myths, rituals, and doctrines of the community's religion. A task of many professional storytellers in the Storytelling Revival, on the other hand, is to tell some of these stories in ways that the telling is palatable to people of the full range of worldviews, including Atheism (or Rationalism, as it is known in India).

The question then arises: "When telling to a mixed audience, how can a story be modified to appeal to everyone, and exclude no one?" One way to universalise a story is to have "Mother Nature" do things in the story. Mother Nature is a vague concept which simply refers to the workings of nature (which may or may not include fate, destiny, "poetic justice," karma, etc.). Thus, speaking of Mother Nature does not imply or negate belief in a supernatural being. Each listener can interpret the story in terms of his/her own belief system.

For example, in one of my workshops some time ago, one participant was developing a story in which a (Christian) angel shook a tree, causing an apple to fall and knock someone on the head. For the sake of helping the story to engage all listeners, some of the other workshop participants encouraged the storyteller to consider having the tree be shaken by a bird, or by the wind. Christian people could believe that the Christian God had sent the bird or the wind, Hindus could believe that one of their Gods was behind it, Rationalists could believe it was just a coincidence (or that it was Mother Nature), and so on. Leaving the exact nature of the causes of things open, fits especially well with Hinduism, as Hinduism states that on one level, the divine has no name or shape.

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[2] One collection in which some of the content of the genre was presented and discussed is: Stuart Blackburn, *Moral Fictions: Tamil Folktales from the Oral Tradition*, Folklore Fellows Communications No. 278, Helsinki, Finland: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 2005.

Another question that may arise is: "If one does not believe in the existence of the God concerned, can a mythological story have any meaning, significance, or value?" I would answer, "Yes, elements of these stories may represent natural, psychological, and sociological forces and patterns; and we may be able to learn a great deal from these stories even without believing them to be literally true in every detail".

Traditional stories often express the idea that a divine figure is looking over us, and will reward good behavior, and punish bad behavior. This concept is neatly illustrated by one Kanikaran legend. (The Kanikaran, or Kani, are a tribal people living in the far south of the Western Ghats mountains, in Tamil Nadu and Kerala. I did my doctoral research with Kani people on the Tamil Nadu side of the border. In the course of this research, I was told the two Kani stories retold in this paper.[3]) This story states that once a badly-behaving man was chasing a udumbu in the forest (udumbu are huge lizards which can almost reach the size of humans). The udumbu moved between two boulders. When the man followed, the boulders came together and crushed the man.

This story seems to imply that this udumbu and these boulders were part of a God's -- or Mother Nature's -- plan to punish this badly-behaving man. Here, as in many traditional stories, all existence is perceived as being animated by an Organising Principle. The wish to see the universe in these terms seems to be a constant in much human thought. What changes is whether this Organising Principle is seen as a God in an organised religion, a vague higher power, one's own conscience, or in some other way. A question here is: "Is one's destiny controlled by one's own self (and by other humans), or is there a supernatural consciousness and power outside of humans that can affect us?" This is a question that each individual, under the guidance of his/her parents and community members, must answer for him/herself.

The idea persists among many people in India, as elsewhere, that the existence of God -- almost any God -- needs to be inculcated in children in order to scare the children into behaving well. This is known in India as the "social control" approach. A possible difficulty associated with this approach is that if the young person might at some point come to believe that this particular God might not exist, the young person might then feel it might be ok and safe to do anything, for there would be no punishment (from that God).

An alternate, or complementary, foundation onto which to build a young person's sense of the need to do good and to avoid doing bad, might just be human ethics, especially the idea that if one does good to others, they will tend to treat one well; but if one treats others badly, they will tend to treat one badly. It can also be taught that there is a need to do good in the world for the sake of establishing one's own sense of self-worth: if one creates a good self (by behaving well), then one will have a good conscience about oneself, and one will tend to love, respect, and reward oneself.

[3] For further information about the Kani people, please see: Eric Miller, "Ethnographic Videoconferencing, as Applied to Songs/Chants/Dances/Games of South Indian Children, and Language Learning," PhD dissertation, Folklore Program, University of Pennsylvania, 2010, www.storytellingandvideoconferencing.com/280.html . And: Eric Miller and Murugan Kani, "Cultivating a Forest Language: Development Ideas for Kani Tribal People of Tamil Nadu's Kanniyakumari District", Proceedings of the First All-India Conference of the Kanniyakumari Academy of Arts and Sciences, Nagarcoil, 2004, www.storytellingandvideoconferencing.com/22.pdf .

When working with stories in the Storytelling Revival context, a shift in attitude of teller and listeners that often occurs is from the *devotional* (in which the approach may be to accept, and not question, supernatural and other elements of stories); to the *exploratory* (in which the approach may be to question anything in stories, and to articulate all of one's ideas and findings in the process).

Many children in India today (again, as elsewhere) are focused on watching TV (especially cartoons) and on playing video games. Many parents observe anxiously as they see their children having little interest in reading and writing, or in designing and making things. English-language storytelling and story-listening in India is often expected to help children develop spoken English communication skills, and to help them develop reading and writing abilities and interests. From this point of view, the religious -- and even the ethical -- teachings of stories are secondary.

An important element of the Storytelling Revival (especially in the West) has been feminist utilisations of ancient Goddesses as role models for present-day women.[4] This approach has at times romanticised Goddesses as being always nurturing, kind, and gentle, and facilitating societies based on partnership and equality (as opposed to a perceived dominance-model of patriarchy). In fact, actual local south Indian Goddesses, when they get angry, are often considered capable of being very destructive. Kannagi, the heroine of *Silappathikaram* (the *Epic of the Ankle*t) is just one example.[5]

In any case, around the world the eco-feminist concept of "Gaia" has arisen. Gaia refers to the earth as a living interconnected bio-system. (In ancient Greek religion, Gaia was a Goddess of the earth.) Storytelling in India today is often expected to refer to conserving nature (protecting the environment, especially animals and vegetation; raising awareness about the need to not disturb ecological systems; reducing global warming, saving energy, reducing production of garbage, etc), and to helping to develop social skills and life skills in children, such as conflict resolution, and empathy. These are the new global ideals which to some degree have taken the place of the ideals of particular religions (but which are also recycled versions of the ideals of various religions).

The Kanikaran story, the *Story of the Seven Brothers*, is related to ecological themes. This story tells of how six older brothers invited their youngest brother to go to the forest with them to hunt for wild pigs. In the forest, they turned on their youngest brother and stabbed him with their spears, killing him. The youngest brother's two dogs ran to the youngest brother's wife, in the village, and persuaded her to accompany them back to her husband's body in the forest. When she saw her husband's body there on the grass, she knelt and began to weep and wail (such lamenting is known in Tamil Nadu as *Oppari*). A snake and a mongoose were nearby. Usually they fight with each other, but on this day they were playing together. The snake heard the lady's weeping and said to her, "Madame, please do not worry! We will get the medicine and bring your husband back to life." They got the necessary plants, ground them, and applied the mixture to the youngest brother's body. Indeed, he came back to life, and he, his two dogs, and his wife, returned to the village. When the matter was raised before the village panchayat (governing council), it was decided that the six older brothers should be exiled from the village,

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[4] Merlin Stone, *When God was a Woman*, New York: Barnes and Noble, 1976. For many people, this book served as a founder of the field of feminist Goddess Studies. Also, see the writings of Marija Gimbutas.

[5] For a summary of the story of Kannagi, please see: Eric Miller, "In Praise of Citizen Kannagi," *The Hindu* (Chennai Edition), p. 13, 16 June 2006, http://www.storytellinginstitute.org/14.pdf .

and this was done. In this story, the treachery of humans is contrasted with the healing power of animals and plants.

Other traditional stories have great value in terms of the historical and sociological teaching-and-learning that can occur around them. One example of this is the *Annanmar Kathai* (also known as the *Elder Brothers Story*, *Ponnivala*, and *Epic of the Three Twins*). This story is native to Tamil Nadu's Coimbature district, and has been studied extensively by Canadian scholar Dr. Brenda Beck.[6] Almost forty years ago, she audio-recorded a storyteller telling this story over many hours. She has developed this study into history and social studies lessons, centering around the story's portrayal of conflicts between farmers, craftspeople, and tribal people.[7] Dr. Beck and her team have composed 26 animated episodes (each one lasting approximately thirty minutes), using animation based on a type of south Indian puppets. Students can also use the project's software and puppet images to make additional episodes of original cartoons. This project brings ancient epic and mythology into multimedia, and gives students chances to discuss and write about the material, and design new material. In this way, the glamour of new technology can be invested in local traditional culture, so that local young people might be more interested to learn about their local culture.

Among the elements that religions contain are mythology, doctrine, and ideology. In the globalization process, a religion may become popular over large geographical areas. Organised religions (also known as, the Great Religions) tend to various degrees to involve the transcending of local nature, time, and space. Stories -- especially parables -- continue to be widely used by these organised religions, to teach the lessons of the religion.

However, *styles* of storytelling tends to be delivered in local dialects, for, by, and with members of local communities. Local cultures tend to interact with nature in unique ways, and feature various types of diversity. But it takes a good deal of time and effort to get to know local cultures. For one thing, one needs to learn the local language, dialect, and/or slang. The local is often explored (in qualitative terms) by Anthropologists and Folklorists via the method known as Ethnographic Fieldwork with Participant Observation.

Ways that members of the public can explore local cultures include *Story Tourism*, *Storytelling Tourism*, and *Language Tourism*. Story Tours offer to visitors the opportunity to visit the places where a story is believed to have occurred. Storytelling Tours give visitors the chance to listen to and tell stories along the way -- even to learn to tell local stories in local styles (with the help of translation, when needed). These processes may be similar to pilgrimages, but may not have the devotional component. A number of Chennai-based organizations offer such experiences.[8]

One way of creating infrastructure for such tourism can be the development of *Living Museums*. These are museums that are often partly outdoors, and feature exhibitions that include objects that are still in everyday use; with community members acting as tour guides. A Living Museum about the heritage of sea-fishing and sea-travel has been proposed by members of Chennai's sea-fishing

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[6] Brenda Beck, *The Three Twins: The Telling of a South Indian Folk Epic*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982. And: Brenda Beck, Translator, *Elder Brothers Story: An Oral Epic of Tamil Nadu*, Madras, India: Institute of Asian Studies, 1992.

[7] Brenda Beck, *A Teacher's Handbook: Linking the Ponnivala Story (Annanmar Kathai) to Modern Life*, Unpublished, 2011. http://ponnivala.com/Education/index.html .

[8] Storytrails, http://www.storytrails.in . *Places of Kannagi* Storytelling Tour, http://www.storytellinginstitute.org/30.html .

communities, and others.[9] In such contexts, multimedia can be used to help teach, document, and exhibit aspects of local cultures. Complementing physical visits, language and storytelling training can also be given via Skype (and other types of) videoconference.

In the above-described ways, visitors can discover through storytelling a locality's (often interwoven and mutually supportive) cultural, linguistic, and biological diversity.[10]

One organisation in India that works with storytelling and tribal people is Acoustic Traditional, which presents an annual "Festival of Indigenous Storytellers."[11] This Bangalore-based organization uses storytelling as a way of communicating tribal people's diverse and rich traditional knowledge systems.

Despite all of the changes occurring in Indian society: the epics (*Ramayana, Mahabharata*, *Silappathikaram*, etc.) and mythology continue to provide models for behavior for many Indian people, and contribute deeply to their identities -- regardless of whether or not these individuals may believe the events to have actually taken place, and regardless of whether or not they may believe in the existence of the divine figures involved. It is in these stories that many Indian people seem to find and learn their Indian-ness. In storytelling workshops, I often invite participants to choose one episode from an epic. Working with such episodes -- telling and discusing them -- often become the centerpiece of the workshop for participants.

Other types of stories we work with in storytelling workshops include animal stories and fairy tales. Animal stories, of course, are not just about animals. Each animal can be seen as representing a different aspect of the human personality. For examples: the rabbit can represent the part of us that is panicky but may also be clever; the lion, the wise king of the jungle, tends to represent the part of us that makes a full and fair investigation before taking action; the fox represents our cunning side; the dog represents our wandering nature, and also our sense of loyalty.

Some of these projections are similar in all cultures, but others are particular to various cultures. For example, in the West, the snake is associated with evil (specifically with the Christian devil); whereas in the East, snakes are considered very noble, are often associated with benevolent divine figures, and are typically found in Raja-Rani tales working for a king, coiled-up on top of, and protecting, a treasure of gold.

Two of the world's most famous and popular compilations of animal stories originated in India: the *Jataka Tales,* and the *Panchatantra Storie*s. (*Aesop's Fables* were collected in Greece, but many of these stories may also have come from the East.) While the *Jataka Tales* are meant to illustrate principles of Buddhism, some of these stories may be older than Buddhism, and most of these stories can be appreciated simply as stories with universal lessons about good and bad behaviour.

The frame story of the *Panchatantra* collection is that there was a king who had three sons, all of whom were dull. The king requested assistance from one of his ministers in educating the boys, and preparing them to manage a large organization (the

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[9] Vasantha Surya, "A Whale of a Tale," *The Hindu*, Metroplus section, page 4, March 2009, http://tinyurl.com/3zntpm5 .

[10] Luisa Maffi, "Linguistic, Cultural, and Biological Diversity," *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 29:599-617, 2005. www.terralingua.org .

[11] www.acoustictraditional.org .

kingdom). The minister worked daily with the boys -- telling them stories and eliciting the boys' feelings and thoughts about each story. After a year, the boys were much more bright, thoughtful, and articulate. Each *Panchatantra* story has to be considered carefully -- and possibly modified -- before telling it to children, as a motif that exists in some of these stories is that it may be dangerous to make friends with people outside of one's caste, and this may not be a message that one may want to teach children today.

Animal stories remain popular in India, but here as elsewhere, people's relation to them is different from what it used to be. People used to have a lot more direct contact with a wide variety of animals. Today, many people still yearn to visit forest areas, but most people experience nature (including most animals) primarily through TV and other media, and through their imaginations. In ancient days, stories added fantasy to people's experience of nature, by portraying animals who could talk and have adventures. Now nature itself is mostly experienced as fantasy -- so if fantasy is added to that, it is fantasy added to fantasy.

Western fairy tales seem to be different from similar Indian stories in at least two regards: 1) While fairies are spoken of especially in Europe and Scandinavia, India specialises in other types of divine figures. And, 2) The motif of a young person going off on his/her own to make his/her way in the world -- a basic element of many Western fairy tales -- may not resonate so much in traditional India, where children are held so very close to their families and kinship groups.

In the *Ramayana,* one of India's most prominent epics, Rama journeys to the forest, but he does not go alone. He is accompanied by his immediate family, his wife and brother.

The present-day culture of India is of course becoming more individualistic, in both positive and negative senses. For example, when Indian women develop their "life stories" in storytelling workshops, a prominent motif is often the need to balance family obligations on the one hand, and to develop one's own talents, interests, and intellectual, creative, and professional aspirations on the other hand. While older women often tell of delaying their individual development, younger women often seem to not to plan to do so to the same degree. Incidentally, many people who attend storytelling workshops in India are women who have married and who have had children, and who are now considering becoming professional storytellers.

The word, "epic," has undergone a transformation in India. In the West, an epic is a long story about a character who travels from one end of the realm to the other, having many experiences along the way. In the end, the hero/ine often creates a new institution. Epics of the West -- such as the (originally) oral epic, the *Odyssey* (about the adventures of Odysseus on his way home from the Trojan War); and the literary epic, the *Aeneid* (about events leading up to the founding of Rome) -- are primarily about human heroes. Divine figures are in the background and are on the side, helping and hindering the central, human figure -- but the epic hero is human.

In the two most famous Indian epics, on the other hand -- *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* -- many of the central characters are themselves divine. This relates to how in the Hindu religion, anything and anyone can be considered an incarnation, avatar, and manifestation of a divine figure. The divine is in everything, and everything is composed of the divine: existence itself is Maya, the play of the divine. This is in contrast to the Western concept of humans being quite separate from the divine. In *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, the distinctions between *epic*, *mythology*, *legend*, and *history* break down: many Indian people consider *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* to be all of these genres at once.

Incidentally, the afore-mentioned Tamil epic that tells the story of Kannagi -- *Silappathikaram* (the *Epic of the Ankle*t) -- is for the most part a human story (a story about humans). When I first read the story, I was shocked that such a human story could have been produced in India approximately 1,500 years ago.

When professional storytellers tell Western fairy tales in India, they may at times need to think about whether or not to keep the Western details in place -- such as the heroine's golden hair, and the four seasons and their attributes (Summer's heat and dryness; Autumn's coolness; Winter's cold, snow, and ice; and Spring's renewed life) -- or to Indianise the stories and thus make the details more familiar (for example, in Chennai, by referring to a Hot season; and a Rainy season). There is no right or wrong answer about this: it is a matter of taste.

Regarding illustrations of stories: Much of the media in India tends to present and glamourise light skin. If children see only light-skinned people in storybooks and on TV, how can they reconcile this with the reality of most Indian people being dark-skinned? This question relates to how Western images of Jesus typically show him as a light-skinned white person, whereas a person living in West Asia (as the Middle East is known in India) 2,000 years ago would very likely have had darker skin. And yet, images of Jesus as a white man are shown all over the world, especially in countries populated by dark-skinned people. Is it desirable for people to not absorb the reality of how people around them look? It would not seem to be a very healthy practice to feed Indian children an intellectual and imaginative diet only of light-skinned people and foreign stories. If one did so -- how could these Indian children feel any groundedness as Indian people living in India? Helping Indian children to experience such groundedness might seem to be a mission and responsibility of storytelling in India.

Stories and storytelling tend to be very respected in the business world in India. Leaders of Human Resource Departments often engage professional storytellers to lead workshops among various groups in corporations. In this context, listening to, telling, and discussing stories of all sorts is often especially valued for stress-reduction and team-building.

Storytelling in India used to be considered by many people to consist only of the telling of traditional stories, such as animal stories, and epics. The realisation is now growing that the field can also include the developing and telling of other types of stories, including *personal experience stories*, and even one's *life story*.

In summary: There are myriad storytelling activities occurring in India today, in education, entertainment, and business. The proverbial grandmother telling stories to children during the children's eating time (to help to encourage the children to eat) is in many instances being replaced, or complemented, by storytelling in more professionalised and commercialised contexts.

Eric Miller was born, raised, and trained in storytelling in NYC; he earned a PhD in Folklore from the University of Pennsylvania (in Philadelphia); and has settled in Chennai (on India's southeast coast). He co-founded (in 2007) and directs the World Storytelling Institute (www.storytellinginstitute.org). He is currently working towards a Masters degree in Psychology, and is helping to develop the field of Storytelling Therapy. eric@storytellinginstitute.org, storytellingandvideoconferencing.com