

Sailors of Stories

By Ayesha Singh and Sunita Raghu | Published: 29th July 2017 10:00 PM |

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India is a sea of stories. On its tides are old ships piloted by new sailors. A talented group of men and women, who have plundered the treasures of Hindoostan's folklore, grandmother's tales and the vast canvas of the epics, are bringing its tales to the contemporary audience. Their inspiration is the soul of the story. Today, individuals such as Neelesh Misra who brought back storytelling to

radio, Sanjoy Roy who was the pioneer of several festivals around the art form, Koitso Salil Mukhia who is bringing back shamanic stories of his community, Samatha Sharma who is telling tales for therapeutic purposes, Mohan Krishnan, the banker who trained freshers using the medium at the Reserve Bank of India and later traded his profession for storytelling, have made it their journey of exploration. The reintroduction has taken a leaf out of the 'global storytelling' revival surge of the late 60s. Here, we introduce raconteurs who are changing the way we live in the world of words.

Healing Touch

Laila Paladugu, 35, Hyderabad
Founder-Director, Kathakalpa



Pic : R Satish Babu

Laila Paladugu, founder-director of Kathakalpa, which promotes life skills through storytelling, left her corporate career as a trainer at S&P Global in Hyderabad to start this learning centre. It facilitates mental, social, and academic development in children. Through workshops she conducts on weekends, summer holidays and after school, the focus is to hone study, thinking and social skills. She also helps students with their routine dilemmas, and trains teachers.

The healing effect of stories is something Laila has been particularly interested in. She believes that while listening to stories, we become its characters. "That's why they impact us so much. We live them through the narrator," she says. At the moment she's working on collecting and writing stories that impart life skills, which in turn helps children manage their lives and teach them the art of negotiating, time management, leadership and problem solving. The importance of being able to accept no for an answer and to move on from hurt, are just some of the things she's developing content on.

An interesting alternative to war.
Tug of war

When your willpower was most tested.

When my four-year-old daughter was cracking jokes as I seriously explained home rules to her

The internet

is... Like an ice-cream in front of you but your hands are tied

Training the Teachers

Deepa Kiran, 40, Hyderabad
Founder-Director, Story Arts India



Deepa Kiran has told stories to people between the age of one and 92, but of late there's one thing that the founder-director of Story Arts India has been hearing often—the need for short, entertaining performances. Speaking to us from the International Storytelling Festival in Austria, she says, “Somehow we are settling for the idea that laughing, clapping and getting overwhelmed—be it graphics, 3D, Dolby sound, etc—is the only way of having a good time. What about going with the flow and quietly focusing on one thing?”

Of all storytelling forms, she endorses the oral one with full gusto as she believes that unlike narration in movies, the verbal tradition makes an instant human connection.

Her group reaches out to everybody with folk, environment-related, historic and mythological stories, and embellishes them with music and animation. Her forte is to work with pedagogical possibilities of storytelling. She's been working with children since 2000, and with teachers since 2011.

A good share of her work is dedicated to teacher training. It encourages them to break inhibitions and explore their self-expressions in more creative ways, and to learn implementable ways for introducing the art form in the classroom for language development and understanding concepts, etc. This educationalist, writer and voice-over artist is also a resource person for the Ministry of Culture, working with Central government teachers of all states.

What do you tend to lose often? My temper

Most interesting thing you experienced this year.

Being in a quiet village in the Austrian countryside with an Austrian storyteller's family

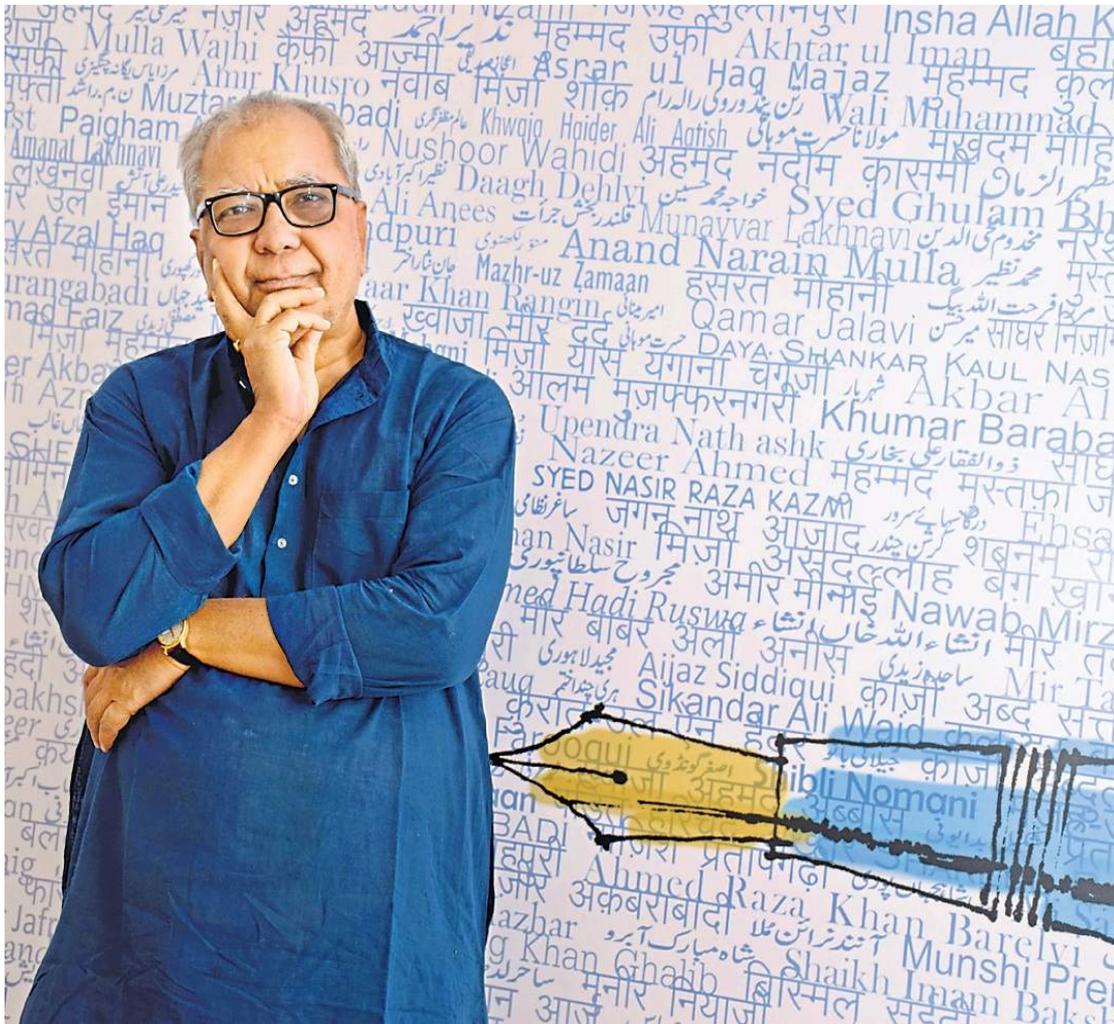
If you could know the absolute truth to one question, what would it be?

Who am I?

Minding his Language

Jameel Gulrays, 67, Mumbai

Founder, Katha Kathan



Pic : Arun Jetlie

It's the first Saturday of the month, and Jameel Gulrays reads from one of his books. As he begins, his wrinkled eyes become moist. His index finger reaches out to wipe his tears. He invests himself so deeply in the weekly narrations that he becomes emotional. "The tears are just a manifestation of how cathartic I find the medium of storytelling," he says. It's important for him that Indian literature is preserved, and what better way than through stories. "One day I was sitting in my library wondering what would happen to my books after my demise. It's most likely that they would be sold in scrap or become plates for somebody's bhel. It was then that I decided to preserve my writing. Technology helped and I was able to post my literature for posterity on YouTube," he says. His account, Jameel Gulrays, has had over 1.5 lakh views.

What started with Urdu story readings has now progressed to Bengali and Marathi. The idea is to extend the initiative to Odia and South Indian languages, and those from the Northeast. The disturbing fate of most languages, especially our mother tongue's vulnerability, encouraged him to fight for their revival. This happened through Katha Kathan that he formed in 2016. The initiative brings like-minded people who are passionate about language and literature to congregate and narrate stories. "Unlike films or television, there are no visuals to accompany. The listener has to paint the picture himself, thus honing his cognitive abilities," he says.

Most unimaginative commercial you've recently seen.
Patanjali commercials

What annoys you most? Wrong usage of Urdu in various media

A place you would visit on a lazy weekday afternoon. Gaylords Restaurant

Young Turk

Ankit Chadha, 29, Delhi

Dastango



For his age, Ankit Chadha has achieved a lot. As one of the youngest storytellers in India, he has been instrumental in reviving dastangoi, an Urdu oral storytelling art form from the 16th century. It started in 2010 after he attended a dastangoi workshop by Mahmood Farooqui, a celebrated dastango. The next one-and-a-half years were spent perfecting episodes from the dastaan of Urdu dastango Amir Hamza. In 2012, Chadha wrote a spoof that was an autobiographical account of his journey, including the challenges of pronouncing the words sheen qaaf to carrying elaborate costumes. "This was followed by a dastangoi on mobile phones. Its success encouraged me to weave contemporary narratives based on research. For three years, I continued to be the youngest dastango, till I trained someone younger in 2013," says Chadha.

Sponsorship and patronage remain an impediment in the art form's progress. People are still unaware of its existence. Chadha remembers how at a government-sponsored event, the anchor introduced them as ghazal singers. His work centres around biographies of historical/literary personalities, contemporary socio-economic issues, and dastans for children. "Audiences have asked me to weave tales from themes ranging from a software application to godmen," he says.

If you could brainwash somebody, who and what would it be?
By telling myself that shampooing is self-purification

You appreciate most about your friends... Their choice of friends

On what occasion do you lie?
When it can be interpreted as truth

Preaching Through Puppets

Padmini Rangarajan, 44, Hyderabad

Founder-director , Sphoorthi Theatre for Educational Puppetry, Art & Craft



Pic : R Satish Babu

Every morning the peetam (stool) would be brought and placed in the centre of the room. Finding his balance on it, Padmini Rangarajan's father would begin reciting shlokas. She didn't realise then, but his daily narrations were slowly leaving a strong imprint on her mind. With sufficient voice modulation and hand gestures, he got her addicted. Years later, it all manifested in Rangarajan becoming a storyteller. For her, the choice of props are puppets. Complementing educational puppetry with mainstream academics has been her effort. The idea is to teach language skills, mathematics and social and civic sciences in collaboration with teachers and institutions. Her work entails preserving and promoting a platform for stories and puppetry.

Her observation has been that in the states in the north and east, storytelling is still a work in progress. In the south, however, there is far more scope of experiencing it. Right now she is working on stories of mahatmas, acharyas and women of India. Some of these include Sri Ramanujacharya, Kakatiya Vaibhavam and Komaram Bheem. The medium has now become such a powerful catalyst for knowledge sharing and learning that Rangarajan wishes to take it to all those who haven't experienced it yet.

Most unelegant thing you do. I often meet people wearing a paint stained dress and hands

What makes you cry?

Old and ageing people who long to talk

Describe the times we live in, in three words. Most precious one

Catalytic Narrations

Ameen Haque, 45, Bengaluru

Founder, The Storywallahs



Pic : Vinod Kumar

After finding his seat on a flight, Ameen Haque's attention shifted from making himself comfortable to the face of the restless child next to him. He instantly knew how to calm her down—by telling her a story. Within minutes, the child was addicted to Haque's narration and quietened down. "That's the power of storytelling," he says. If somebody was asked to describe the pythagoras theorem, chances are that they wouldn't remember it, but if asked to recall the popular hare and tortoise tale, they would do so in a jiffy, he believes. Haque got into storytelling after a successful career in advertising, brand building and a bit of theatre.

He believes the potential of the medium has not been leveraged in education and in business. "Entrepreneurs and leaders need to be storytellers. They need to tell stories of the products they're making. They should engage the investors for funds through these," he says. Bengaluru-based Haque founded The Storywallahs in September 2012, an organisation that works with the art of storytelling in education and business. He really hopes to change prevailing stereotypes. "Why should the stepmother be always portrayed as evil? Why can't she be loving?" he questions, before ending with a quote by the famous writer, poet Rudyard Kipling to drive home a point, "If history was taught in the form of a story, it would not repeat itself."

People from history you fear most. Nathuram Godse, Jinnah, Hitler

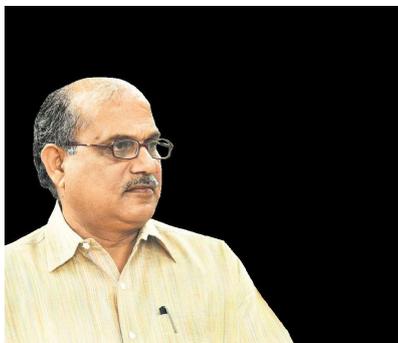
A book that you recently read and enjoyed a lot. Where The Sidewalk Ends by Shel Silverstein

Most liked holiday destination. Destiny Farms near Ooty, and Goa

Tied to Children's Tales

Dash Benhur, 63, Bhubaneswar

Founder member and editor of Nabapallav, president of Itikili Mitikili



Because stories today are fast entering the arena of stark reality unlike the mystic world of the bygone days, Dash Benhur has been working to get the charm back. This Sahitya Akademi Award winner from Odisha is the founder member and editor of Nabapallav, and the president of Itikili Mitikili, an NGO working for furtherance of children's creative talents. He's also associated with Agramee and the Bakul Foundation that organise camps for children to familiarise them with nuanced storytelling.

"Agramee operates mostly for tribal children," he says. Ramayana was recited in his home daily. Through this tradition passed on by the elders in the family, he knows it by heart today. "In our time, everything led to a story, even arithmetic," he says. Today, the human touch is missing. Because there are few writers for children's stories in vernacular languages, the scope for elaborate storytelling is limited. The irony is that a good children's story has its clientele among adults too, but writers don't look at it seriously, believes Benhur.

Worst purchases you've made. A second house. No one should buy anything that becomes a burden even distantly.

Movie that left an impact. Ben-Hur, wherein the character stands firm on his faith and fights for his suffering people. I adopted this as my pen-name.

Something that sounds like a compliment but is an insult. Awards

Magic of Words

Samvedna Amitabh, 43, Mumbai

Drishtee Foundation, Noida



As far back as she can recall, Samvedna Amitabh's life revolved around books, music, dancing and poetry. A poet since childhood and later a journalist, Amitabh often felt there was something missing in her life, till three-and-a-half years ago. That's when storytelling happened. "As a child, summer holidays meant a heap of books from English to Ukrainian folk tales and from other lands. Post marriage, I shifted to Mumbai and after my child was born, my oratory skills, my dance and music intellect found an outlet in storytelling," says Amitabh, who holds a master's degree in English Literature and counts Tagore, Premchand and Chekhov as some of her literary inspirations. She does storytelling for children. "From toddlers jumping around like popcorns to the engrossed kids from which one can map their personality, the sessions are a treat," she says.

She tells stories in Hindi and English. "I don't like how parents use the English story sessions as a tool to increase their children's vocabulary," says Amitabh, who is associated with Noida's Drishte Foundation in providing training to bal mitras (teachers) regarding storytelling in education. Amitabh's vision is to bring all children on an equal platform through the magic of stories. She believes fully in the potential of the medium. "I feel complete because of storytelling," she says.

Folk tale closest to your heart. Ebethoi, a Manipuri folktale

Favourite idiom.

A couplet from the Ramayana, which means, 'If you wish for something from your conscience, you'll get it'

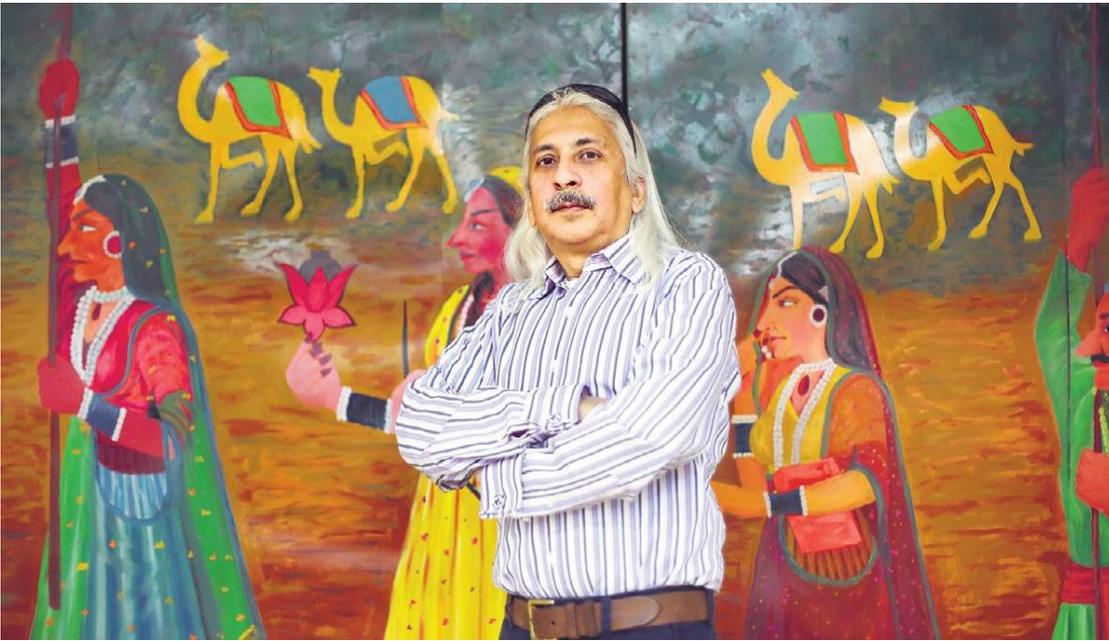
Virtues you possess.

Fighting spirit, love for life, honesty, passion for the arts

Conquering the Arts

Sanjoy Roy, 32, Delhi

Co-founder and managing director, Teamwork Arts



He is the Co-founder and Managing Director of Teamwork Arts, a company that produces festivals such as Kahani: The Magic of Storytelling, Ishara International Puppet Theatre Festival, Mahindra Kabira Festival, and The Sacred, platforms for storytelling, music, heritage walks and more. “In India, all 1.3 billion of us have a cultural DNA that guides us from cradle to grave. Each of us have countless stories, much like fireflies that rise up into the night sky illuminating us with knowledge light,” says Roy.

His outreach in the last few years has been astounding. Stories, according to him, communicate a culture, tradition and philosophy and keeps people grounded in their identity. He says that in an ever-evolving world, it’s vital for us to be defined by cultural heritage and take cognisance of the incredible history and tradition that we have inherited. Through his 27 annual festivals across 40 cities in 16 countries, he is carrying the baton firmly and proudly. According to him, creative industries are coming of age. Opportunities have opened up in the smallest of towns. “Storytelling through the traditions of dastangoi and kahani have found a new life, with artists realising that they can make a living by developing contemporary stories and referring to vast historic material,” he shares.

For him, storytelling has always been alive but perhaps not in the traditional way. He points out that every film, talk and radio shows are replete with oral stories, but in his case, the biggest contribution has been creating organised platforms to reimagine the magic of storytelling.

The funniest thing about your personality. My hair

If the world’s a stage, what part do you play. The clown

A thing you could eat everyday of the year. Sushi

Tuning into his Frequency

Neelesh Misra, 44, Lucknow

Radio storyteller

Every despondency was met with a warm smile. Every taunt was greeted with kind words. Nothing has been able to bring the country’s most loved radio storyteller Neelesh Misra’s spirit to tell stories down.

The medium is not for mere entertainment, he says. It’s also for healing. Stories have a hypnotic effect on the listener as their attention is totally fixed on the teller. It also fosters new scopes for reasoning, encourages a fresh lease of imagination and brings about the scope for new possibilities.



Neelesh has started working with doctors to learn the impact of storytelling on those going through difficulties to use it as a potent medicine.

He hopes to collaborate with the Ministry of Human Resource Development to create a storytelling project. Through it, he wants to create stories that will be told in a mandatory narration class in schools. “Over the last six years, thousands of students have told us that their studies and stress improved after listening to our stories,” he says. His new baby, an audio storytelling show called Kahaani Express (inspired by the Indian Railways), can be heard on the Saavan app from Monday to Thursday. It traverses through the kaleidoscope of India, talking about train journeys. “All through the preparation, I went through an emotional journey remembering the time when I used to take trains from Lucknow to Kathgodam to study in Nainital,” he says. Before he leaves, he makes an interesting point. Storytelling never went anywhere, so its revival is out of the question. What has happened, he says, is the revival of the story listener. That’s food for thought.

When you're really hungry, how do you behave? I go quiet

Your biggest goof-up in the kitchen. Pulao with unpeeled potatoes. There was mud on it too.

Current state of mind. Turbulent with new ideas

Living the Change

Sudha Umashanker, 62, Chennai

Journalist, writer and professional storyteller



Pic : Sunish P surendran

We've come full circle," says journalist-cum-storyteller Sudha Umashanker, referring to the revival of storytelling. "Sometime after the 90s, technology took over our lives. Now, there's an interest generated in reading books with stories on YouTube, podcast, etc, so it's all happening backwards," says Umashanker. She believes that after the 90s, the world changed, in that people wanted to be more visible—whether it was a politician or a harikatha exponent, they had to speak well to gather the interest of the audience. If one had a reasonable fund of stories, it would give them an edge, she thinks. "Nowadays, parents want specialised training in storytelling for their children to better their language skills," she says.

For Umashanker, who is inspired by storyteller Diane Ferlatte's work, it all started when she began to read to the children in the family. "In journalism also, one is recounting other people's stories," says Umashanker, who has been narrating stories for seven years. With hand puppets, dancing, singing and enacting, storytelling has assumed a larger-than-life stature.

She tells tales in English and Tamil, and believes the internet is a gold mine of stories, "For real life stories such as violence on women, I go out and meet people. I use it to draw attention to the subtle violence carried out on women," she says. She had started a library for children, which is now a place for storytelling sessions.

What do you consider most sacred? Nature, heritage structures and books

Story that most effected you as a child. Little Red Riding Hood, as it was about personal safety, a girl's love for her grandmother, and the ending with the big bad wolf being killed

Which colour reflects your personality best? Red by day and black by night

Therapeutic Sessions
Samatha Sharma, Chennai
Storyteller and founder of Energy Clinic



Pic : Sunish P Surendran

For Chennai-based Samatha Sharma, who has been a storyteller for three years, it fulfills a therapeutic need. “When I was living in Goa, I suffered a traumatic experience but I found that storytelling had the potential to overcome it,” she explains. This painter and reiki healer sources out stories from her personal experiences.

She counts actor, director and playwright Girish Karnad as one among her literary inspirations. “I love the stories in Amar Chitra Katha. There’s a fair amount of good books at the library at Dakshin Chitra in Chennai which I use for reference,” she says. History is another avenue where she delves in for stories, picking up personalities and making them come alive during her sessions. Her audience is primarily women and she holds workshops with corporates. Sharma also runs a healing and art centre called Energy Clinic. She believes that storytelling is a powerful non-judging space, which is a great means of expression.

Your favourite words in the English language. Obfuscation, Kindness, Tumbler

Your longest journey. Back-packing in Europe for two months. I went up to Denmark as I had read that it was full of happy people.

A dish you can cook in a jiffy. Maggi

Nurturing Storytellers

Dr Eric Miller, 53, Chennai

Trainer, director of the World Storytelling Institute

That Dr Eric Miller, a New Yorker settled down in Chennai, married an Indian and started a storytelling institute is a juicy tale. “It was the Tamil epic Silappadikaram, which narrates the story of Kannagi, the woman who sought justice for her wrongly-accused husband from the Pandya king, that entranced me, and that’s why I ended up in Chennai. I had always thought of ancient Indian stories being mythological, but Kannagi’s was a real human story,” says Miller, who has taught public speaking, acting, storytelling, creative writing and business writing to students in the US, besides pursuing his Ph.D in folklore from the University of Pennsylvania. Since launching the World Storytelling Institute with his wife 10 years ago, Miller has trained 400 people in the techniques, with



Pic : P Jawahar

25 of them turning professional storytellers. “We meet once a month to compare notes,” says Miller, whose focus is on adult storytelling. “Geeta Ramanujam from Bengaluru had started the revival 20 years ago. Geeta and I started the Indian Storytelling Network in 2011 where storytellers are able to sign themselves up and get hired,” he says.

A character from Shakespeare’s play that you connect with instantly. Prospero, from The Tempest

An American expression that Indians have Difficulty understanding. That’s a piece of cake!

One of your best short story writers. Joseph Conrad

Liberating the Spirit
Anubha Rastogi, 30, Hyderabad
Professional storyteller



Pic: R Satish Babu

She’s spent the last few years telling stories, and living many more of them. Anubha Rastogi also trains in using storytelling in everyday life. Sometimes she narrates them just to entertain, but more often with an intent to address a behavioural trait. She has also trained teachers, along with working with Zee Q’s Kahaani Express, which was a national event in 2014 and 2015. Putting her skills to good use, she worked as a facilitator for NGO Milaan: Be The Change, training over 15 adolescent girls from Uttar Pradesh in life skills to enable them to work on social action projects.

“One of my most memorable assignments was when I travelled to Anantpur. I met locals and recorded stories of social change through a volunteer initiative of UNDP, and created a magazine report that will be used in various UNDP volunteer forms,”she says. Corporates are realising the

importance of the medium and are motivating employees. People are also using it as a tool to address larger social and professional issues, she says.

A question you're constantly asking yourself. What if there's life on another planet and they're watching us

What's infinite in your life. Happiness. It's always there, just needs a little peek-a-boo.

How do you excuse yourself from a boring conversation. Chai, anyone? I'm going to get one

Gift of Mentoring

Mohan Krishnan, 62, Chennai

Storyteller and mentor



Pic : Sunish P Surendran

When he suffered a polio attack at the age of four, his father carried him on his shoulders, telling him stories of wellbeing. "His capacity for telling stories was amazing. Maybe that kept him alive till he was 96 years old," recalls Mohan Krishnan, a banker who became a storyteller once he retired from his business. He had been imparting banking gyaan in the form of stories. "At the Reserve Bank of India, I was part of the training and development division, and since banking can be a very boring subject for freshers, I explained things in the form of incidents and scenarios," says Krishnan. Post-retirement, he became a happiness coach for software companies where he encourages professionals to write their own stories. "In India, the art has been looked as a pastime for children, but now is being embraced," says Krishnan, who has mentored and helped people start their own ventures. His storytelling inspirations have been his guru Swami Dayanand Saraswati, who taught the Vedanta purely in the form of stories, as well as directors Satyajit Ray and Bharati Raja, and his father.

He recalls when he narrated a story at the Anna Centenary Library in Chennai. The tale was that once while he was rubbing a flashlight, a genie came out. It said that clean habits must be instilled in people. "Through it, I went on to explain the importance of managing waste. A little girl was so influenced by it that she refused to allow her mother to throw anything on the street again," says Krishnan.

If you could be someone from history, who would you be? Veda Vyasa, as he was an amazing storyteller

Your most preferred sweet dish. Rosogolla immersed in rasa, or else it is a plain golla, zero

Words in English that best describes your personality. Articulate, cheerful

Contemporary Contours

Koitso Salil Mukhia, 36, Darjeeling

Founder, Acoustic Traditional



It was a moment of great epiphany. Uptill now, Koitso Salil Mukhia had ignored every bit of his father's wise words that encouraged him to preserve and present stories of their shamanic community. Only the subsequent years proved that their indigenous community and identity were closely associated with these stories and tied with their existence. "It had to be pursued," he told himself, and from that day on, he's set out on the traditional trail.

He and his wife Barkha Henry founded Acoustic Traditional in 1999. They document myths and legends, and add them to an archive where everyone can find rich preserves of stories. They organise the annual Festival of Indigenous Storytellers, individual sessions and workshops to keep oral histories alive.

There are three kinds of stories he tells. The first one being recorded stories from other communities, which includes those from the Himalayan region (Darjeeling and Sikkim). Secondly, the Mun Dum, which are thousands of years old shamanic stories survived by the vanishing shamans. "They include our origins, creation of the universe, mainly the birth of the Himalayas, how they were as small as a musk deer's tooth," he says. The third category comprises personal stories that begin with adventure.

Koitso has taken upon himself to pass these on via sessions, talks and lectures. He encourages communities to retell and record, not necessarily write books.

He doesn't ascribe any rules to storytelling. "Sometimes to not say anything can be the greatest story told," he says.

What scares you most? Tall buildings and Ferris wheels

The most random thing people ask you. My age

What makes you laugh?

Too much seriousness

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