Once Upon a Time…Back to Stage: Return of Oral Storytelling in India

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Abstract

India is a land where parents handover their lands to their sons, their jewelry to their daughters and their stories to their grandchildren. Indian tales have survived for centuries without ink and paper. The art of storytelling in India is as old as its mountains and as vibrant as its rivers. At a time when storytelling is considered to be bade goodbye to grandma's creaking old charpoy, a flicker of hope emerged in the form of professional storytellers. This paper tries to trace the recent developments in the Indian art of storytelling through content analysis of available secondary data related to the topic. The objective of the research is to identify why and how the long lost art of oral storytelling is making a come-back to the once popular land of storytellers in the world.

Keywords: Millennial Media, Oral Storytelling, Professional Storytellers, Traditional Media.

Introduction

The stage was all aglow with flickering lamps hung high to the tent poles. The *Pradhanakathak* (Narrator) was standing at the centre of the stage with his head right below a huge mike hung from the ceiling. The audience were sitting around the stage rapt with attention waiting for the next big twist in the story. The narrator was savouring the attention of the audience waiting for the right moment to break his pause and continue his narrative. Though the scene seems quite out of the tarnished history books of the glorious days of Indian storytelling, it is a reality in India's 21st century cosmopolitan and metropolitan cities.

The Story So Far

The art of storytelling in India is considered to be older than the first civilization that took birth in this land. To trace the actual roots of storytelling in the country and to pinpoint at an accurate period of time is quite a difficult task. Much before stories got recorded and reproduced in the form of words and artefacts, an oral tradition of storytelling began in the Indian subcontinent. To tell a story is more heart touching and immersive than writing or painting a story. Much later comes filming and virtually animating a story. Storytelling in this paper refers to oral storytelling traditions that have no intervening media between the narrator and his audience. Storytelling describes the social and cultural activity of sharing stories, sometimes with improvisation, theatrics, or embellishment. Every culture has its own stories or narratives, which are shared as a means of entertainment, education, cultural preservation or instilling moral values (Chaitin, 2003). This paper concerns itself with the traditional *Kathakalakshepam*formats where a small group gathers around a common ground to listen to a *Kathak*.

Story is an outlet for expression. It is a product of the human need to share information and to communicate. From father to son, from leader to community, from kings to subjects, experience, history, religion, culture and heritage were passed down in the form of stories. Stories had many purposes in the society. Stories taught out safety out of experiences. Stories taught reverence to nature that protects. Stories taught the honour in being virtuous. Stories taught the consequences of evil passions. Before formal education began in the county stories were the actual education given to children.

Religion and Storytelling

With God at the centre of storytelling, religious tales took form. Ecological conservation, communal harmony, patriotism, love for all beings, valour and art were all taught in the name of God. Gradually music and dance joined the oration and storytelling for once became a brighter form of edutainment. New emotions were added to the educational stories. Humour came in handy to keep the audience attentive. The *Prathanakathak* was joined by jesters to add situational comedy to the storytelling flow.

Indian storytelling formats in later years were divided into classical performances and folklore. Influenced by Hinduism, Indian folk tales are robust with central religious figures and moral lessons; they were used to preserve history, important people and places, as well as the religious rites and ceremonies of various Indian regions (fairytalez.com, 2019). Classical performances were rigid and were supposed to cater to the well-educated and royal communities while folk performances were stories for and by the folks.

Few Prominent Storytelling Formats of India

India has a story for each of its communities. With its diverse culture and traditions, storytelling formats in India vary from one region to another. Some of the most popular formats are *Dastangoi*, *Yakshagana*, and *Harikatha* (Bhattacharjee, 2016). There are innumerable storytelling formats in India that use elaborate costumes and follow strict ritual and rhythmic practices. This paper deals with only those forms of oral storytelling that use no other medium than words and music to narrate the tale.

Dastangoi

Dastangoi is a Persian storytelling format brought by the Moghuls to India. The storytellers used no properties in this format. The audience are held attentive with the oratory and acting skills of the storytellers. Dastangoi though a very recent addition to Indian traditional media in comparison to other age old formats, merged into the Indian culture so well that it still holds ground in the land.The great art saw its decline by mid-nineteenth century due to various reasons, the impact of colonialism being one of them (Gopalakrishnan, 2019).

Yakshagana Taala Maddale

Yakshagana, known for its elobarate costumes and vibrant dance forms has a twin wing of music and extensive dialogues known as Yakshagana Taala Maddale. Taala and Maddela are the musical instruments used in the narration.It is a strange synthesis of *Harikatha*, Kavya vachana, mono-acting (Rajan, 2017). Yakshagana Taala Maddale is still popular in certain pockets of Karnataka.

Harikatha

Harikatha literally translates to the story of Hari (Vishnu). *Harikatha* is also known as Kathakalakshepam which means to spend time with stories. *Harikatha* is a popular classical form of storytelling in South India. *Harikatha* is a one-man oral storytelling tradition that has a Bhagavatha reciting the story of Hari to his audience with contemporary examples and in-depth explanation of the slokas. *Yakshagana*, *Burraktha* and *Kathakali* are considered to be adapted from *Harikatha* (Ramanujam, 2018).

Burrakatha

Burrakatha is an oral storytelling tradition of Andhra Pradesh. It is named after the musical instrument 'Burra' used in the format. *Burrakatha* is a folk storytelling format that speaks the language of the folks. *Burrakatha* was a popular media during Indian freedom struggle (Bayya, 2013). It is a song, dance and dialogue form of storytelling with a *Prathanakathak* accompanied by two *Vanthas* with respective musical instruments.

Indian storytelling formats slowly seemed to wane away during the colonial period. Religion being the core of Indian art and culture, western influence succeeded in suppressing the traditional art and media forms.

Storytelling during Colonial rule

The greatest merit of India storytelling is that almost all of its stories are religious. The greatest bane of Indian storytelling ironically also is that almost all its stories are religious. Colonial rule brought with it the idea of science and technology to India. Many age-old practices rampant in the country are proved to be superstitions. Human rights violations in the name of religion are brought into light thus awakening scientific temper among Indians.

The dark side of this awakening is that many of the Indian traditions that were not superstitions and were quite important for a sustainable lifestyle were also swept aside in the name of myths and mysteries. Decentralised village planning of India that kept the idea of a nation alive through innumerable conquers for centuries was one of such examples. Practices like Yoga and Ayurveda that were once a part of life were pushed into the basket of illogical religious practices while the current millennium is seeing a worldwide awareness rising about Yoga and Ayurveda.

Storytelling likewise was also considered to be grandma's religious tales leading the society into peril. The name God in every story added a mark of unscientific to the art and led to its decline. Storytelling also like other traditional media formats was tabooed and chased into temple grounds from community centres. The advent of new practices like film making set the tone for a complete decline of the art form.

Impact of Film on Storytelling

Among many other traditions that gave way to technological development, storytelling was at the fore. Film and motion pictures made stories more realistic and visual. While written and oral traditions of storytelling had until then vied for prominence among the literate and illiterate, film catered to both the sections alike. Film has no status barrier. Film had no literary barrier. Film spoke to everyone and anyone that cared to listen.

Another important reason behind the fall of Indian storytelling tradition is the lack of innovation. Indian art of storytelling like many others arts stuck to religion and did not dare look out of it. There were no new stories to be heard once you have grown up. Storytelling thus became a repetition of the age-old stories of victory of good over evil. Stories did not change with the society. The good in the society might have long changed but its story remained intact. Thus even when the society knew that clouds are puffs of smoke and water, our Narada still travelled to other worlds on them. This lack of innovation led to the gradual decline of storytelling. Film, with its open arms for new stories and new narratives dominated storytelling sooner than expectations. Though Indian cinema began with filming mythological plays social drama and parallel cinema soon took over.

Storytellers of the Second Millennium

Gilgamesh, the oldest surviving epic king,and Cheops, whose sons are said to have entertained their father with their stories (Storytellingday.net, 2019), to today's cyborg heroes' stories have evolved with the society. It is interesting to note that the second millennium is once again resplendent with new stories and characters. Storytelling has once again moved into spotlight with professional storytellers coming up. New storytelling houses are coming up to cater to the story needs of educational institutions, communities and corporate institutions.

Some of the popular storytelling organizations in India are listed below[i]:

Kathalaya

Kathalaya, a house of stories was established in the year 1998. Two decades of storytelling journey with schools and institutions made them one of the leading storytelling houses in Bangalore. Kathalaya offers storytelling training to teachers to enhance their teaching skills with children. They also offer storytelling workshops to corporate establishments to promote better team environment in the institutions. Kathalaya has received many awards for its continuous struggle to keep alive the art of storytelling among children and working professionals.

Your Story Bag

Your Story Bag is a Storytelling, Consulting & Training firm based out of Noida that works with Children, Schools & Parents, Individuals, Entrepreneurs and Corporates. In their own words, they work with Schools, Teachers and Parents in helping children 'discover expressions, emotions & life through stories.' They offer unique story based reading, communication and creative activity workshops and classes. They work with Students & Professional in crafting their personal stories for their work and life. They offer services to college aspirants in helping them craft their stories. They also help young professionals better their presentation skills through concepts of storytelling. They work with Businesses and Corporates in crafting their organizational, leadership and business stories. In collaboration with StrongKofee they offer a unique Story-based communication and training program. Scientifically designed, this program helps the organization and its leaders fuel their communication and presentations with stories and storytelling techniques.

Tape a Tale

Tape a Tale is a platform where you can submit audio recorded personal stories for the world to listen. Tape a Tale is a space where one can tell, listen, feel, and share and connect with people from all walks of life. These stories are told by people who have lived them. Tape a Tale also conducts Storytelling sessions across 20 cities featuring the best storytellers on their platform. They also conduct open-mics to encourage new storytellers.

Human Library

Human Library is a novel concept where humans are borrowed by readers to get a story. Individuals with stories are set up as a human books and any enthusiastic reader can pick their choice of a human book and start a dialogue with them. This is a two way oral storytelling concept that caters to individual needs. Storytelling which has for centuries been a group affair is through this experiment brought down to

individual level. Also at Human Library real stories are told in place of centuries old passed down stories. The concept of human libraries is taking a giant leap towards bridging the gap between storytellers and their listeners. It is also kindling the art of storytelling lying deep within every individual.

Open Mic

Open mic storytelling platforms are increasing day-by-day in Indian cities. Storytelling workshops are being conducted every once in a while for children, teachers, youth as well as working professionals. Open-mics are for anyone to come and share their views, stories or verse. They are meant for closed groups with relatively open minds.

Many factors are involved in promoting oral storytelling as a profession in India and below are the reasons why this revival is considered a welcome move.

Story behind Revival

The latest stand-ups and open-mic storytelling platforms that seem to be full of millennial vigour are following most of the traditional media formats. Though the terminology has changed and the content reinvented, most of the formats are quite similar. Based on a content study of various traditional media forms like Dastangoi, Harikatha and Yakshagana Taala Maddela and Next Gen Live media forms like Stand-ups and Open mics, the below similarities are dissimilarities are drawn.

Similarities

Setting

The setting for traditional storytelling events was as basic as possible. A simple stage was erected with space for audience to be seated in front or around the stage. Dull lamps lit the stage and simple mics were used to enhance the voice of the narrator. Before the advent of mics the narrator directly spoke to his listeners. There shall be continuous feedback from the audience in the form of laughter, nods and becks, and sometimes retorts. Sometimes the narrator asks questions and the audience answer them for him. Thus most of the time the exercise stays interactive and conversational. This interactive setting mostly possible for small groups is seen in today's millennial media events like stand-ups and open-mics.

Humour

Humour is the one element that best draws a comparison between traditional media formats and millennial media formats. Humour is the fuel to storytelling both then and now. Oral storytellers of ancient India were experts in jest making. Few formats like *Burrakatha* have additional jesters to add lighter notes to the content. Most of the stand-ups and open-mics today are filled with humour. When you have to show the darker side of a man tell him that his lighter side cannot become even lighter. The new generation live media does the same in the name of stories and verses.

Costumes

No rigid costume requirements are seen in either traditional oral storytelling platforms or current day oral storytelling platforms. There are other traditional media in India that require elaborate costumes but the formats of concern in this research do not require any specific attires. This simplicity makes them more close to the millennials. Costumes try to draw a boundary between the man on-stage and the audience off-stage. New live media does not encourage any differences among the narrators and their audience.

Censorship

Since colonial period Indian media formats are being witness to lots of censor regulations. Right from print to digital media all formats of presentation are screened by an ethical board. Before the advent of the colonial overlords, there was no censorship to the traditional media formats. There was no regulation saying who is allowed to see what. There was no authority to regulate the spoken words. Criticism and admiration of all forms in all words was allowed. Today's professional storytelling platforms also enjoy the freedom from authoritative censorship that had been restricting activists from speaking their mind out for so long.

Language

Folk media is called so because it speaks the language of the folks. Gradually with mass media coming up universal language for huge masses has become the norm of media. Stand-ups and closed group storytelling today uses common spoken language by the respective group. Folks of 21st century are once again speaking their own language unafraid of not being able to cater to the needs of the masses.

Dissimilarities

Women

Women storytellers are rare during medieval India. In later years women going on stage was a social dishonour. There are no such regulations now. People from all genders are taking centre-stage to speak about their issues and to fight for better causes. Taboos like these should not be encouraged in the name of revival of traditional media.

Mythology

Oral storytelling of ancient India was mostly religious. Most of the stories revolved around Gods and Goddesses. There was no great hero but God and when it comes to God, there was no question of raising criticism. New stories are coming up in the current century. Abridged and reinterpreted versions of mythology are being used to raise a point too. For example, the decentralisation theory spoken by Duryodana might not be justified then but in the current democratic society that we live in he seems to have a point. It is unadvisable to try to keep the society unchanged forever with the same old stories and laws of land.

Need for Revival

A need to tell and hear stories is essential to the species Homo sapiens – second in necessity apparently after nourishment and before love and shelter. Millions survive without love or home, almost none in silence; the opposite of silence leads quickly to narrative, and the sound of story is the dominant sound of our lives, from the small accounts of our day's events to the vast incommunicable constructs of psychopaths (Price, 1978).

According to the content analysis done, the following factors lead to the necessity for a revival of the lost traditional formats of oral storytelling:

Widens thinking

"Once upon a time there lived a king in a palace".

As the narrator said those words, the children around him started imagining a king in a palace according to their own circumstances and surroundings. A palace for a child might be filled with savouries and playgrounds. A palace for a young man might be filled with adventures and

opportunities. A palace for an artist is full of sculptures. A palace for a visionary is full of power and authority. Story kindles the imagination lying deep within human hearts and ignites the gears of the mind. In contrast when a palace is filmed or shown in a painting a palace looks exactly the same to all the viewers. A palace is what the storyteller (in this context the film-maker or the artists) sees. A king is a fixed image unlike the personification of the listener as it happens in oral storytelling. Oral storytelling is essential to keep the human imagination alive. Creative minds are born through imagination and imagination is born through stories. Hence stories are necessary to provide for a continuous supply of creativity in the society. Stories on other hand are also not closed like other media formats. Stories always give scope for the listener to continue them in their minds. Stories are not mere entertainment tools. They do more than entertaining their listeners. They broaden the thinking capabilities of the audience thus providing a broad minded society.

Time for community

India traditional media formats are mostly community centric. Unlike the new media trends that cater to individual needs traditional media formats cater to community on a whole. Storytelling is one of the best forms of traditional Indian media that held the community together in thick and thin. In the growing digital societies with individual being the centre of all development, time for community is growing lesser and lesser every day. Community is gradually becoming a fantasy with individuals connecting with their kith and kin beyond continents but staying detached to their immediate geographical neighbours. This trend is considered to be one the reasons behind the increasing levels of loneliness among people. Though artificial intelligence is being put to use to deal with loneliness it is proving to be a catalyst rather than a suppressor of the feeling of isolation (Allen, 2018). Loneliness is the main reason behind depression and anxiety that is engulfing the society today. Thus a moment for the community is most essential to beat loneliness and in turn depression and anxiety which lead to suicidal notions.

Oral Storytelling is one format which brings the community together and binds it together. Unlike digital playlists and films, stories make people talk. Doubts are raised, explanations obtained, a rhythm is maintained in the process that keeps the audience engaged in the entire play time. With contemporary examples and humour storytellers keep the audience active and

alive. Storytelling is not addictive or immersive that it shields one from the rest of the audience. A film is considered best when a viewer finds himself alone and detached in a fully housed cinema. A story on the other hand is considered best when it connects the viewer to each and every other viewer present in the arena. The art of community building that is present in storytelling is what makes it a necessary diversion in the highly digitised society that we are living in.

Preserve culture and heritage

Indian mythology tales are considered to have been told much before alphabet is invented. With alphabet those tales found resort in word. Later they got painting. Further they found themselves carved on temples. With rhythm they grew more melodious. Dance forms originated around them. Plays were enacted. Even films began repeating the same stories until they found ways to write contemporary ones. Indian folk and mythological tales have seen centuries and within them thus encompass the rich culture and heritage of the country through generations.

Indian history out of political and economic archives can be found well preserved and well contained in its folklore. The culture, the customs, the attire, the language every inch of ancient to medieval to modern India is still living in its folklore and it is always a necessity to preserve this rich culture and heritage of the country by not letting its traditions perish.

Stories for education

For centuries, formal educational system is India depended on the art of storytelling. Stories were told in temples, Gurukulas and community meeting grounds. Children were brought up through stories. Virtues and non-virtues are explained through victories of good over evil. Concepts like ecological conservation, self-sustained living, and sustainable development were all promoted through stories. Wisdom was passed down from generation to generation through stories. Indian education system has been oral for many centuries and this oral tradition of passing on knowledge involved stories and verses.

Even today many educational institutions are trying to revive the lost art of storytelling to bring back the glory of ancient Indian education system. Rote learning as opposed to oral storytelling

is a memory builder rather than a mind sharpener. Oral storytelling develops creative thinking and questioning among children thus leading them to conceptual understanding of their subjects. There is also a growing to need to teach virtues in the current society and there can be no great practices than oral storytelling to imbibe virtuous living in children.

Stories for development

There is a tale in Indian folklore than speaks of a man who never grew a plant in his garden. The man finally ends of lonely with no children around him and not even bees to sing for his birthday. These kinds of stories develop ecological consciousness among the listeners without directly telling them the macro level subjects of climate change and global warming. Professional storytelling platforms in 21st century are trying to cater to this need for development through story telling. Hard hitting topics like gender rights and human rights are being spoken boldly through stories and are making people think twice about the society that they live in.

Like community radio, storytelling platforms are also giving a voice to the communities. They are boldly speaking about developmental issues without hitting the nail on the head. There is growing necessity hence for these formats to revive to better educate the society towards better developmental practices.

Conclusion

Oral Storytelling had been a part of parcel of ancient Indian culture. Every individual back then was a storyteller. Children started their early education with stories and the elderly ended their lives telling stories to every listener they can find that could spare sometime. Storytelling helped promote development and deal with many macro level issues in the country. It provided a sense of harmony among communities. With the advent of new age media practices this art slowly began to perish. By the end of the colonial rule India lost its great art of storytelling to the dark shadows of stage-plays and the creaking old charpoys of grandmothers staring at vast skies waiting for the annual visits of their grandchildren.

21st century India miraculously is seeing a revival trend towards the art of oral storytelling. Many factors led to this revival like need for community building and a voice that is not harsh but

speaks directly at untouched issues. Open-mics have given scope to the rise storytelling among youth. Professional storytellers are growing in number gradually and this is a welcome sign for a country like India that has its rich culture and heritage carefully sticking to the draperies of its traditions.

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For a detailed list of storytellers in India follow these links:

 https://www.tell-a-tale.com/storytellers-in-india-a-list/

http://kathalaya.org/about-kathalaya/

http://www.yourstorybag.com/about-us/

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