

# Tellers of tales weave a success story

New crop of performers in India are making the lost art of storytelling relevant again and viable commercially

Anupama Chandrasekaran

Chennai: On a breezy March evening, a crowd squeezes through a traffic jam to enter an open-air auditorium in a narrow street in Chennai, gradually occupying all the 500 seats.

"This episode of the Ramayana tells us how to deal with knots in our lives," the artiste on stage, Vishakha Hari, says in a sing-song tone in Tamil, throwing a philosophical spin to ancient poet Valmiki's second book of verses that starts with epic hero Ram's planned coronation, but ends with his banishment to the forest.

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"It talks about rules and regulations," she says in English to the nodding crowd. Most people remain glued to their seats through the two-and-a-half-hour performance that ends close to dinner time.

Telling tales may be labelled as a dinosaur in today's high-tech and sensationally visual world of movies, television shows and Internet videos. But a new crop of performers is flavouring this lost art form with relevance and stamping it with commercial viability through strong DVD sales and spiking demand from schools and corporates as a catalyst for creativity.



Pulling crowds: Vishakha Hari during a performance in Chennai. K Ganesh / Mint

Since her transition from a carnatic singer to ace raconteur a few years ago, Hari, who is in her early 30s, has almost always performed to a full house. The qualified chartered accountant's powerful classical South Indian singing weaved into her animated Harikatha—a form of storytelling that digs into epic works, with roots in Maharashtra that later gained popularity in the Thanjavur

district of Tamil Nadu—has spurred her rise.

Hari has released five DVDs since 2007. With sales of nearly 76,000 copies, they are the top-selling products nationwide in the non-film genre for Moser

Baer India Ltd. And the usually free Harikatha performances now come for a price at some venues to control the crowds thronging to hear her.

"Harikatha was usually popular only amongst old people and any audio recording of this form of storytelling contributed low-volume sales. But Vishakha changed that," says J. Muthukumar, a music consultant who advised Moser Baer to endorse this young storyteller after witnessing her packed live performances.

"Her costume (Hari wears a nine-yard silk sari in traditional Tamil *madisar* style), the delivery with everyday examples and her singing, keeps the audience engaged."

But Hari is an anachronism at time other non-classical but traditional Indian storytelling forms such as Kaavad in Rajasthan, Pandavani in Chhattishgarh and Villupattu in Tamil Nadu are limited largely to the vocabulary of folklore historians.

"Times have always been bad for artistes," says Delhi-based Mahmood Farooqui, a former Rhodes scholar at the UK's prestigious Oxford University.

"We live in a visual culture and so oral forms of performances will never reclaim their past glory," adds Farooqui, who is credited with reviving the ancient Islamic storytelling form of Dastangoi—meaning an epic's narration—with nearly 140 ticketless performances staged in the past five years. "The audience might enjoy it but they would not want to pay for it like they would for a movie."

Still, folklore scholar Nina Sabnani believes contemporary storytellers such as Chennai-based Jeeva Raghunath could be key in recasting these traditional story forms for today's audience, thereby influencing demand and a willingness to pay.

Most people who watch Raghunath conjure up voices and contort her face to portray the characters in a story at a bookstore event or in a school find it impossible to erase her from memory. This fast-talking, former teacher donned the garb of a full-time storyteller nearly a decade ago, after being urged by American Cathy Spagnoli. Spagnoli and fellow American Margaret Read Macdonald have resuscitated storytelling in the US besides mentoring a rising number of narrators in Asian countries such as Singapore.

"When I deliver a story I strongly feel I am in a trance," says 53-year-old Raghunath, who admits to foraging through at least 20 stories to find a good narrative that lends itself to audience interaction through a "repeat-after-me" style that she borrows from Macdonald—the grand dame of modern storytelling. "There's a mass mesmerism that sets in, and if you do that you are a good presenter."

While lesser-known contemporary storytellers charge up to Rs2,000 for a day, performers like Raghunath can get double that amount for a single performance.

Amrutash Mishra, 24, who started a Chennai-based library service last year, is hoping there will be a happy ending for his story. The programme piloted at one of the city's schools, added at least 500 books to the existing set up logging Rs40 per month per student. A key promotional tool for his start-up: storytelling sessions.

He, hoping his Indian Institute of Technology-Madras-incubated business will

break even next year, faces an ironical problem: a lack of storytellers who can raise the bar beyond boring mimicry and long-winding story lines.

"Previously, storytelling happened automatically in families," says Eric Miller, director of the World Storytelling Institute located in Chennai that offers training in this field. "But current social changes have triggered demand for professional storytellers who can take stories that are religious or ritualistic and present them interestingly in a secular context."

*anupama.c@livemint.com*