

## **Once Upon a Time.....**

### **Introduction**

Once upon a time..... The oldest and widely used start to a story has been preserved in its most natural and popular form as “the beginning to a story,” the world over.

I think all of us fondly remember “long , long ago,” too when we would anticipate a delightful story starting with these magical words which was very common in the oral tradition.

The story was about history, art, literature, famous personalities such as musicians, freedom fighters, children’s lullabies , an anecdote, even games which were played then and so on .

Even today, these two simple start to stories which have been used for over hundreds of years is so popular. It has been preserved both in the oral and written tradition.

When I decided on the title of my paper I thought what better way than this to compliment the theme.

**“Creating the future, preserving, digitizing and accessing all forms of children’s and young adults’ cultural heritage.”**

Starting with “Once upon a time... I shall share my views on this very relevant topic with reference to my country India.

The approach will broadly cover the following:

- Current Status in India, storytelling through various art forms.
- Role of libraries – urban and rural. An insight into both school and public libraries.
- Participation of private enterprise.
- Blue print for the Future- a National Perspective.

### **Current Status in India.**

Culture and Heritage are valuable and important as they are our legacy. We talk about our history and culture everyday as they are integrated in our everyday lives. Be it in music, dance or traditional art forms, through history books in our education system or through stories and poetry.

These are gifts from our ancestors where men and women left behind a great many things from their lives. Stories of long ago which are so interesting because they really happened.

History of a Nation is a marvelous story in a giant canvas that continues to fascinate the young and old.

Cultural Heritage can take many forms, buildings, artifacts, songs, dances, stories, scrolls and books and traditional games pertaining to each region.

Cultures and civilizations dating back to thousands of years has to be recorded and preserved.

How much has been already done and how much more are we doing?

In India the oral tradition had very strong roots. Folk music, dance and drama provided a glimpse into the rich treasures of our culture and heritage. Every state has a rich cultural base and have a lot to offer. Folktales and stories of kings and queens, gods and goddesses were passed down by the elders in a family. This was how an evening was spent in the days gone by.

What is the scenario today? It has still not changed in many villages and remote areas of my country. Why, because after a days hard work in the fields and tending to cattle the family still sits together after their evening meal to listen to stories from the elders.

The reason being that in a vast country like India technology has not touched many areas because of logistics, availability of modern resources and so on.

There were no written records of the past life of the people or their rich cultural heritage, ethnological materials, folk arts and traditions. Here again, the role of oral information passed down through generations has been one of the key sources of knowing the history of people from different regions of India.

Which is why the vibrancy of the oral tradition is amazing and alive even today.

Here I have a beautiful example of how a story is sung.

We have the famous art form called Pandavani. Pandavani is a riveting genre of storytelling. Ms Teejan Bai is a renowned exponent of this art form. Her lively performance involves narrating episodes from the epic Mahabharata in Chhattisgarhi dialect while playing the one string instrument, the "Tanpura."

The Mahabharata is an epic, one of the greatest works of the world, a complete literature. It showcases human emotions so beautifully that one need not study anything other than the Mahabharata to understand human nature. It has story within a story on every aspect of human relationships. This is superbly dramatized as she sings using mime and dance movements. She has kept this tradition alive very artistically and admirably. She was recognized for her work in preserving this art form by the Govt of India and was awarded the Padmabhushan. She is also a Sangeet Natak Akademi Awardee.

This is just one example there are many, many more such brilliant people in India who are preserving our culture and heritage with a very special focus on the future generations of children and youth.

Kathalaya, a Bangalore based academy of storytelling founded by Geetha Ramanujam has preserved the oral tradition and have been instrumental in training teachers, librarians and others. They have stories about culture and heritage, festivals and seasons. There are individual tellers and groups who work across India.

Kathalaya also focus on research and revival of storytelling traditions and ancient knowledge systems. They organize visits to heritage centres, folk trails, art centres and museums with stories of places and people. Geetha believes in using storytelling as a tool of culture and learning.

There are various such organizations across India where storytellings through various art forms have been encouraged as a means of preserving our culture and heritage. The list is long but it is a fact that storytelling is the simplest method and the most accepted and cost effective form of preserving our heritage and culture for our children and youth.

In India it has been used as a time tested method reaching the remotest corners of the country where accessibility and availability of technology is still far removed.

Storytellers are the most reliable members of society who walk to the remotest areas with a bag full of stories, music, dance and drama and charm their young audiences with their narration of the culture and heritage of exotic India.

### **The role of libraries both in the urban and rural areas and Schools.**

The starting point for this is the State Central Library of Shillong, in Meghalaya which is in the North East of India. As a school going child I used this library and read the most fascinating books on history, heritage and culture. Now, this was forty years ago. What does this prove?

Well, for one this does prove that Libraries were the most important source for books on tradition, festivals, culture, history and heritage. The state owned library provided the best in books for children and young adults. So, we were a generation who grew up by just reading books and absorbed the information in it. We read about people in different parts of the world, their culture, and their traditions and so on. I knew about Ireland and Italy because we had Irish and Italian nuns who taught us. Their stories about their culture fascinated me to the extent I learnt the Irish dance and so did my friends. We wore the white satin dress with a sash and the boys dressed in the kilt and we performed the Irish dance on our annual day.

This speaks volumes for the role of the library in preserving and ensuring that children have access to multiple forms of learning about heritage and culture, most importantly through books.

We read about India's diverse culture. In those days Assam was one big state and Shillong was the capital. Now there are seven states known as the seven sisters each unique with its own culture and heritage. Yet, there is a common thread that has preserved and documented this fascinating information, books and libraries. Pockets of small and large libraries exist across India, some well known others little known and yet doing a marvelous job of reaching out to children and young adults with books in the regional language. The regional language has a repository of books on culture and heritage. We do have the State libraries run by the state government and the district libraries which are smaller but meet the demands of the local readership. Usually these libraries cater to the local demand and books on culture, heritage and biography are available.

The Archaeological Survey of India has been instrumental in preserving our cultural heritage in many ways. The ASI ensures that artifacts are stored in museums, songs and stories are recorded and documented, sculptures and inscriptions are preserved. They also take care and ensure the safety of the numerous monuments spread across the country.

The libraries under the Ministry of Culture, of which the Raja Rammohan Roy Library in Kolkatta (West Bengal) is the nodal agency of the Government of India to support library services and systems. The library is rich with its remarkable collection of books on the Indian Culture.

The other very famous and renowned library is the Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Public Library located in Patna, Bihar. The Khuda Bakhsh library has a unique repository of about 21000 oriental manuscripts and 2.5 lakh printed books.

Acknowledging the immense historical and intellectual value of its rich priceless collection the Government of India has declared the library an Institution of National importance by an act of Parliament in 1869.

I must mention the famous Rampur Raza Library, located in Rampur, Uttar Pradesh, which is considered as one of the world's magnificent repository of cultural heritage and a treasure house of knowledge founded in 1774. It was through the hard work of generations of Nawabs who believed in preserving this invaluable collection of works relating to different traditions, religions and rare historic and artistic objects.

It houses very rare specimens of Islamic Calligraphy, miniature paintings, astronomical instruments and rare illustrated works in Persian and Arabic languages and 60,000 printed books.

A well known public library the Rampur Raza library boasts of books maintained bibliographically with data base computerized. The library has initiated a digitization programme to ensure access to students, researchers and historians.

Another very interesting aspect in this library is the conservation laboratory which scientifically preserves, maintains and restores the deteriorating collection of books and manuscripts etc due to aging effects and the vagaries of nature.

This conservation centre began in 1995 and has proved an important necessity for the conservation of the valuable books and artefacts in the library.

Another very important and renowned public library is the Serfojis Saraswathi Mahal Library situated in the Thanjavur Royal Palace, TamilNadu. It is one of the oldest libraries in Asia and has rare palm-leaf manuscripts and papers in Tamil, Hindi, Telugu, Marathi, English and other languages.

There are Sanskrit collections in different scripts and the 19<sup>th</sup> century Persian and Urdu manuscripts too.

After a glimpse of the very well known public libraries it is important to look at the school libraries both in urban and rural sectors.

Most of the schools in the big cities and metros do have libraries with a fair amount of books on culture and heritage.

The National Book Trust, India has published a lot of interesting books for children and young adults.

The National Centre for Children's Literature, NCCI library has a wide range of books for children.

The library is digitized and children who are members of the library can access books on Indian culture and heritage.

The Children's Book Trust one of the leading publishers of children's books has encouraged the publishing of very well researched books on culture and heritage.

In 2012, the book Dances of India was released. It is a well documented book and the monograph explores the Indian cultural heritage and the socio-religious expression culminating beautifully in an art form that represents an amalgamation of painting, sculpture, acting, poetry and literature. The book convinces you that dances are indispensable to our self-revival. The author Leela Venkataraman highlights the social need of storytelling expressed through the various aspects of dance like abhinaya, rasa, music, choreography, attire.... All this is towards creating a deep and significant impact on its young audience.

Thus, there is no dearth of books available and yet there is a thirst for more because of the large numbers of children and young adults.

The Akshara Foundation, a Bangalore based NGO has successfully run libraries in the Government schools and in rural schools of Karnataka. Stories and books with a focus on the culture and heritage of our country are being made available in the libraries. They have been pioneers in this field and closely linked to Akshara Foundation is Pratham Books which publishes in ten Indian Languages.

Another interesting aspect is that a lot of short videos highlighting the Heritage sites are uploaded regularly and accessed by children and young adults in both urban and rural libraries.

Schools have played a major role in upgrading their libraries. They do have videos with the old and new nursery rhymes, Digitization of books on culture and heritage have not really reached the desired levels especially in the rural and remote areas.

The Private and International schools definitely have an edge as they do have state of art technology to enable the use of e books, video games, stories of culture and heritage in multiple forms and much more.

Government schools are being upgraded too but at a much slower pace.

## **Participation of Private Enterprise.**

What is encouraging is the participation of Private Enterprises who have come forward to Conserve, Preserve and Digitize our Nations heritage and culture.

I will tell you about some of our very enterprising and dedicated organizations who have been totally involved in energizing the effort towards creating the future, conserving, preserving and digitizing all forms of our culture and heritage for our children and youth.

## **Innovative methods --- Heritage Walks.**

Bangalore, Pune and Ahmadabad have some amazing heritage walks organized, by those who love their city and are proud of their culture and heritage. This has become very popular as they are leisure walks through the city.

In Bangalore the walk presenters are entrepreneurs and they have special walks for the children called “explorience,” where the kids learn about the surviving heritage, anecdotes from history are narrated and legends are talked about while exploring the city.

A peep into the different cultures which existed in the city and enchanting stories of the founder, a Medieval Chieftan whose name was Kempagowda truly enralls the walkers.

There are also exclusive Cultural walks and Heritage walks where glimpses of how the old city was, what kind of people lived, how did it transform from a small medieval town to the big bustling metropolis? All these are answered

In Pune the fascinating tales of the Indian city or Pettah and the European Cantonment are narrated with amusing anecdotes.

The history, culture and food is explored.

In Ahmadabad the walks give you a glimpse of the glorious history, tradition and living architecture.

Another well known organization is INTACH – the Indian National Trust for Art and Culture.

It is India’s largest non-profit membership organization dedicated to conservation and preservation of India’s cultural living, tangible and intangible Heritage.

INTACH plays a vital role in the listing, documentation and conservation of historic structures and precincts of architectural, historical and cultural value.

INTACH has established the Craft and Community Heritage Division to conserve and promote the cultural heritage of communities living in special heritage areas. They help them to upgrade their craft skills and inculcate in them a pride in their heritage and confidence a kills.

INTACH works across the country with craftsmen and assist in the welfare and development of the artisan communities.

The INTACH library and documentation centre in New Delhi was set up to enable scholars and researchers to understand the methods of conservation of architectural and natural heritage.

INTACH recognized the importance of heritage education in spreading the awareness among the people and was instrumental in setting up the Heritage Education and Communication Service, HECS in 1998.

The main aim was to create awareness among different target groups such as schools, colleges, teachers and students.

It designs different types of training programmes with the aim to make citizens, youth and children aware of their role in the conservation and preservation of their natural, cultural and living heritage.

They are involved in spreading the importance of heritage in education.

They have set up Heritage clubs in schools. Indeed ITACH has shown the way how a dedicated effort can work wonders in getting the children and young adults involved. This is a sustainable venture.

I have for you the INTACH Code of Ethics

INTACH has a very comprehensive Code of Ethics that incorporates the ethical standards that every member must follow to achieve the objectives of the organization.

It is the adherence to such standards that determines the public image of an organization.

Therefore, it says that every member of INTACH:

- ✚ Shall cherish and protect our common heritage
- ✚ Shall care for the conservation of the local environment
- ✚ Shall spread concern and a sense of belonging amongst the local community
- ✚ Shall respect our own culture and that of others
- ✚ Shall encourage creative expression and inspire young minds to develop secular and cultural values

INTACH's mission is to conserve heritage is based on the belief that living in harmony will enhance the quality of life and that it is the responsibility of every citizen of India. We need to protect and preserve our heritage for the younger generations to enjoy and to enable them to comprehend Indian History.

INTACH's motto is "Fighting to preserve what is rightfully ours."

SPIC MACAY has made its presence felt among the youth in our schools and colleges.

They are our culturally rich organization - Spic Macay stands for Society for the Promotion of Indian Classical Music and Culture among Youth.

Spic Macay seeks to conserve and promote an awareness of this rich heterogeneous culture among the youth and children of India through focus on the classical arts, along with their attendant legends, rituals, mythology and philosophy and to facilitate an awareness of their deeper and subtler values.

Spic Macay focuses on the priceless cultural heritage rooted in what is essentially Indian Heritage.

They believe in a solid value based education, which involves the absorption of aesthetics and spirituality in an increasingly technical, mundane and competitive world.

This work is educational in spirit and character and locates itself in educational institutions only.

A unique feature of the heritage of India is its inbuilt characteristic of introspection and a philosophy that transcends mere intellectualism.

They encourage informal interaction between students and artists where the artist demonstrates art forms with the help of explanations thus making the art forms easily understood. The student develops a complete and wholesome understanding of not only the art but also the artist as a practitioner of a certain way of life.

Workshops in folk and classical arts, literature, crafts, talks, theatre, cinema and yoga are held in educational institutes. It aims at close interaction between students, artists and craftsmen. Gurukul scholarships provides opportunities to aspiring Shishyas (students) to live for a month with Gurus who have dedicated their life to their arts be it literature, religion or other traditions.

Spic Macay is truly involved in preserving our culture through workshops, exhibitions, films, celebration of national and local festivals, environment and nature care. They organize study tours to places of Cultural importance.

Spic Macay works in association with the Ministry of Culture, Department of Education (Ministry of HRD) Department of Youth Affairs (Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports).

As you can see we do have in place private enterprises collaborating with Governmental Agencies to ensure authentic and vibrant awareness of our heritage and culture among the young generation of children and youth. They do have a wider reach and schools and colleges have become members of Spic Macay.



## **Blueprint for the Future - a National Perspective.**

April 18<sup>th</sup> is celebrated as World Heritage Day in our country. The Nation is conscious of the importance of preserving our rich heritage and culture. There are special events organized for children and youth to create an awareness and love for our heritage and culture.

The Sahitya Akadami has created a concept of Archives.

The National Council of Educational Research and Training, NCERT has involved itself in focusing the inclusion of culture and heritage in the school curriculum.

The Nehru Museum in Delhi recollects preserves and reconstructs the Indian Freedom Struggle and the ideas and values of Jawaharlal Nehru. They have also undertaken a project to digitize manuscripts, photographs and other related documents for research purposes.

They also propose to set up a Digital Archival Management System. The proposal to Digitize Archival Documents will eventually cover approx 90 lakh archival documents which they have. This includes digitization and full text conversation with search facility.

Digitization is important for the future and technology has facilitated this. Children and young adults across the globe will be able to use it.

Libraries and schools have the challenging role because they can reach out to the younger generation.

Yet, the key to accessing all forms of children's and young adults cultural heritage, is the grass root level programmes which have the widest reach and that is storytelling, songs, theatre, books, museums and visits to these places.

Valuing the importance of culture and heritage is important because these rich gifts of the past are our legacy.

Thank you .....Jai Hind

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