

# The Challenges of Storytelling in the Context of keeping alive the Indian Traditions

Sub theme: Traditional Media & Storytelling

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## Abstract

*The Universe is made of stories, not of atoms. ~ Muriel Rukeyser, the American poet and political activist aptly expressed in The Speed of Darkness.*

*To specify the stories about you and me - Storytelling is the most traditional oral art form subsisted for both the story tellers and the listeners alike. This traditional media forms an integral part in imparting our social values which shaped our social fabric since the time immemorial. Storytelling is the prime component of folk media that is an effectual means of communication in contemporary world since it not only facilitate to bond individuals with their traditions but also restore the lost culture of the society. It outlines both verbal and non-verbal communication of expression for the local folks and bestow them a probability to accent out their beliefs on diverse issues. Various nations like India, have innate numerous rich, valuable popular and powerful folk media forms, which were nurtured over the period of time and ensure the emotional veracity of the nation. The expansion of audio-visual and new media transformed the world into a village but could not outshine the folk media of diverse ethnic groups and regions. This research paper will highlight the usage of modern media formats of storytelling like teleconferencing through Skype etc. and further the paper will also focus on the traditional media used in diverse genres of traditional storytelling art forms still prevalent in West Bengal and mention of a few pan Indian perspectives. The paper would also focus on the life and works of a few urban storytellers through interviews who are intrinsically involved to keep the ancient art forms alive through traditional media formats. The research methodology used is through personal interviews by this author.*

Keywords: Folk Media, Traditional Media, Storytelling, Urban Storytellers, Teleconferencing, social media

## Introduction

In 1960's the Storytelling Revival began, which was based on a few people's penchant to bond with other people unswervingly, with no electronic intercession. For these people, the Revival implicated a retort against the existing role that television and other mass media had come to play in their lives. Fifty years later, we are living in a somewhat diverse media setting. Social media—operated by those on their personal, increasingly convenient, electronic communication devices—are key and mounting factors in many peoples' lives. It has become a very useful promotion means for professional storytellers to set video recordings of their performances on YouTube and other video sites. Another set of options the new media landscape presents is audio- and videoconferencing for training in, discussion about, and performance of storytelling. Videoconferencing can be done for complimentary through software programs such as Skype, FaceTime (for Apple devices), Zoom, and Google Hangouts. In mediated ways, teleconferences can facilitate one to meet and interact with many people. They increase one's reach through space and—through recordings of teleconferences—time. The Age of Teleconferencing is just beginning. Teaching, tutoring, training, coaching, counselling, selling, and consulting are just some of the activities that are now being done via teleconference. Through teleconferencing, one can provide specialized services to people around the world. To give just one example: languages—including rare and ancient ones—can be taught via teleconference using storytelling and other forms of verbal play. Although I sometimes use them, personally I am not comfortable with terms such as, “storytelling through teleconferencing,” “audio-mediated storytelling,” and “video mediated storytelling,” because in a sense an event is only fully a storytelling event if the participants are physically present to each other. Do we really want to bestow the word, storytelling, on teleconferences?

A key aspect of storytelling is that participants can, as a story is being told, observe each other aurally and visually (simultaneously or nearly simultaneously), and give feedback to each other. This condition is met by teleconferencing, through the projection and perception of participants' electronic representations. However, in teleconferencing certain aspects of physical presence are diminished or lost, including the senses of spatial depth, touch, smell, and temperature—although technology that would provide information in some of these areas is conceivable. If we do reserve the term “storytelling” for situations in which speakers and

listeners are at the same venue— what about the use of amplified sound and magnified visuals, such as when a speaker's face is projected onto a large screen so that people at the back of the space can see an enlarged moving image of the speaker? These electronic augmentations do not disqualify an event from being “storytelling,” although they may water down the event. Speaking—including storytelling—with people who are physically present may influence speakers to emphasize the importance of each human being. Teleconferencing, especially videoconferencing, seems to me to have a bi-polar (manic/depressive) quality to it: if it works, one feels great, but if the connection is not achieved, one may feel very frustrated and/or embarrassed. Teleconferencing may also have an epic quality to it: momentous, great fun, and filling participants with senses of wonder and accomplishment.

The traditional storytelling involves the ancient traditional folk media formats with personal touch. The most fascinating note is the one to one or one to many unswerving communication in both rural and urban milieu.

## Literature Review

Teleconferencing is facilitating a renaissance of orality—“secondary orality,” as Walter Ong referred to mediated speech in his book, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (Routledge, 1982). To make the most of teleconferencing, people need to develop their conversation, as well as their storytelling, abilities. As teleconferencing is developing, “vertical” packages are being formed. This may involve phone hardware and software maker, a telecommunication service provider, and a content provider, working together. These kinds of packages may present opportunities for offering training in the form of storytelling. - Eric Miller was born, raised, and trained in storytelling in NYC; he studied Folklore at the University of Pennsylvania and has settled in Chennai (on India's southeast coast). He co-founded (in 2007) and directs the World Storytelling Institute ([storytellinginstitute.org](http://storytellinginstitute.org)), and co-founded (in 2011) and co-facilitates the Indian Storytelling Network ([indianstorytellingnetwork.org](http://indianstorytellingnetwork.org)). [eric@storytellingandvideoconferencing.com](mailto:eric@storytellingandvideoconferencing.com)

Storytelling has become a word used to refer to or describe different kinds of narratives or artworks that are more personal. The storytelling that I practice is more akin to traditional myth telling where language is alive with meaning in direct response to a live audience. My personal study has emphasized developing sensitivity to the dynamic qualities of spoken story and engagement as an embodied and relational event. In 2010, I created a mentor program that could occur via long-distance. This program facilitated in-depth preparation of a story for performance. I encouraged a tremendous amount of research, conversations, and personal journaling as part of a step-by-step process of entering the heart of a text and finding deep personal associations to a story. - Laura Simms is an award-winning, internationally renowned storyteller, writer, arts-educator, coach, recording artist, festival director, and humanitarian. She is the Artistic Director of the Hans Christian Andersen Storytelling Centre, and is a Senior Research Fellow at Rutgers University for UNESCO. Laura is a co-founder of the Healing Story Alliance (HSA). [storymentor2010@gmail.com](mailto:storymentor2010@gmail.com)

The Bangalore Storytelling Society (BSS) was founded in 2013, and has facilitated videoconferences (which were also webcast) on World Storytelling Day (WSD, March 20) in 2015, 2016, and 2017, each time using Google Hangouts on Air. The challenge is to utilize the technology without compromising the “ethos” of storytelling. The BSS is planning to host a series of videoconferences that will feature a combination of storytelling workshops that will include performances. Storytellers from around the world will teach and tell. There will be people physically-present with the trainer/performer, people participating in the videoconference from various sites, and others observing the live webcast (and afterwards the web archive). Distant observers may support the storytelling by providing visuals and music. Translation will be provided when needed and teaching-and-learning languages could also be involved. - Aparna Athreya, BANGALORE STORYTELLING SOCIETY President ([aparnaathreya@gmail.com](mailto:aparnaathreya@gmail.com); [kiddywiki.com](http://kiddywiki.com))

## Videoconferencing via the Cloud Storytelling Project

Based in Bangalore, work with a number of schools in the states of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, he began the Cloud Storytelling Project in Feb 2014. The medium is Skype videoconference. A storyteller from a distant location comes online at a designated time and narrates stories to a group of children on the other side of the conference, and discusses the stories with the children. This activity gives children opportunities to improve their listening and comprehension skills. - Manoj Kabre, Educator ([manoj.k@indomim.com](mailto:manoj.k@indomim.com); [can-trust.org](http://can-trust.org))

## Findings

### Storytelling with travellers

Kolkata Story Tours, earlier (Kolkata Photo Tours) – Their website mentions what explorers can expect a medley of human emotions, architectural dizziness, history, art and culture through these walks conducted across the city. Kaushik Chatterjee, of KST, said that they offer tours like to name a few:

The Raj Heritage Walks – To relive the Raj Era Days of a great British venture and its copious trail through stories around Dalhousie Square area & Strand River Front.

The Early Calcutta Walk- Lanes & Bylanes of Old Kolkata and the stories

A Culinary Tour - the stories behind

Bookworming - A walk through College Street, the oldest book market in the east

Table 1. The below mentioned table shows the list of ancient rural oral storytelling traditions still practised in the state of West Bengal. This is only a glimpse there are such innumerable treasures practised in the state and there is no doubt that such rich customs are present in every state of our country. There are a few urban storytellers/ researchers who work closely to document such rare oral traditions. This author has approached such a researcher who is a PHD scholar, Buddhadeb Barman, Jadavpur University, Kolkata. He is of the opinion that much scope and awareness is required in this sector so that the educational institutions and the authorities can incorporate as part of their curriculum. He further stated, "This would encourage young research scholars or students to visit rural India to fathom the real India through such oral tradition of storytelling. Though we know that to be a good communicator we have to sell our ideas or persuade others. But these traditions is very much part of any literary cultural tradition of a language of a state that will keep the traditions as integral part in the centuries to come."

No.	Name of the Festival / Puja	Season / Time of Pujas (Indian Names)	Gender - Male (M) Female(F) Both Boys	Genre/ Name of the Song	Remarks
1.	<i>Tistaburi</i>	<i>Baisakh</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Mecheni</i>	Agricultural/ Offering to river
2.	<i>Daklokki</i>	<i>Ashwin Sankranti</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Rhymes based</i>	Agricultural
3.	<i>Bishori</i>	<i>Nag Panchami</i>	<i>Both</i>	<i>Bhashaan</i>	Snake Puja, Goodwill for all, Puja during wedding season
4.	<i>Hudumadeo &amp; Byangyer Biya</i>	<i>Jaistha</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Hudumadeo Khelargaan</i>	Agricultural /Puja offered to Rain God
5.	<i>Kali Thakurani</i>	<i>Dipanwita Amavasya</i>	<i>Both</i>	<i>Chorkhela/Chor Churni Gaan</i>	Tue/ Sat offering to Goddess Kali around Terai region of Bengal
6.	<i>Satyapir</i>	<i>Baisakh/Jaistha</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Satyapir</i>	Religious solidarity between Hindus/Muslims
7.	<i>Pagelapir</i>	<i>Phalgun</i>	<i>Boys</i>	<i>Rhymes based</i>	Religious solidarity between Hindus/Muslims
8.	<i>Modonkaam</i>	<i>Baisakh</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Baansh Khelargaan</i>	Offering to Trees
9.	<i>Pushuna</i>	<i>Poush Sankranti</i>	<i>Both</i>		Agricultural
10.	<i>Gorokhnath</i>	<i>Phalgun/Baisakh</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Gorokhnather gaan</i>	Agricultural/ Cow Offering
11.	<i>Shalesshwari</i>	<i>Phalgun/Chaitra</i>	<i>Both</i>		Van Devta & Briksha puja
12.	<i>Jagannath &amp; Balaram Thakur</i>	<i>Baisakh</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Kirtan</i>	Vaishnav Devta
13.	<i>Janmashtami &amp; Dadikaado</i>	<i>Shravan</i>	<i>M</i>	Unknown	Agricultural / Krishna Puja
14.	<i>Gamira Thakur &amp; Charak</i>	<i>Bisudh Sankranti</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Gamira thakurer gaan</i>	Puja of Lord Shiva/ Agricultural

## Interviews

This author interviewed Kavita Gupta, who is a member of Indian storytelling Network in Kolkata who closely work with the young children for quite some while. She said, "Storytelling is a traditional oral art form between teller and the listener. I work with young children and parents to move them away from the digital platforms. For children to nurture them to develop creative minds and for parents to meet the challenges of art of parenting" She further stated that what the avenues she uses for these trainings are.

1. Keep it simple
2. Why complicate
3. Acceptable
4. Two way communication – Action and reaction
5. Create relationship with books
6. Make puppets according to their age
7. Voice modulation
8. Body language

Recently this author had taken interview of another storyteller of Kolkata for her personal blog <https://jhumpaspeaks.wordpress.com/>, Priyanka Chatterjee, who inspired us to immerse into the world of narratives to find a way of life...

### What are the effective avenues that you adopt for the sessions?

I generally use 15 or 16 different styles of contemporary tools like slides / ppt presentations but I do remember to keep away from the audio-visual format because storytelling is basically a traditional art that encourages heart to heart union. I believe my voice and my body language engage my audience more as I have strong base in theatre. I give contemporary feel to my stories and provide twists which add different flavour to the storytelling sessions. Like the *Patachitra* from Midnapore district of West Bengal which is a vertical scroll of storytelling, a traditional art form of the state.

I am writing a book on documenting traditional storytelling art forms named, '*PABUJI KI PHAD*'.

*Pabuji Ki Phad* is a religious scroll painting of folk deities, which is used for a musical interpretation of the only existing ancient traditional folk art form in Rajasthan, *Phad* painting in the world of the epic of Pabuji, the Rathod Rajput chief. *Bhopas* of Pabasar are the bards and also priests who are the traditional narrators of this art form. It is a horizontal scroll of (5ft.) and stories are told for consecutive 5 nights and I have been working to narrate it with modern twist.

There is a 'mobile temple' in which storytellers are a husband-wife duo with a musical instrument and the wife hold a 'lighting lamp'. Stories are generally of adventurous genre. Tourists also get attracted to these places and seek to experience the traditional format of storytelling. '*Kavad*' is such format and a mobile temple in Rajasthan. I am trying to give a modern perspective on pan-Indian basis. It is the colourful wooden toy like a box, is actually a shrine, wherein live the stories. Mostly the stories come from epics and local folklores. It is also known as a moving temple. In Mewar, the home of *Kavad* is primarily to tell family stories including genealogies.

There are folklores of West Bengal too, which the British people had compiled for their governance purpose but had huge archival value. In Japanese there is a term called '*Kamishibai*' to lure the young children. It is a form of Japanese street theatre and storytelling that was popular during the Depression of 1930s and the post-war era until the advent of television. It was told by a narrator who travelled to the street corners with the sets of illustrated boards that he/she placed on a miniature stage like device and narrated the stories by changing each image.



Pic 1. Patachitra from West Bengal

Pic 2. Pabuji ki Phad from Rajasthan



What are your research areas?

My area of interest is pretty wide so I study the global storytellers and also the lesser known ancient oral storytellers who are fighting for their identity. Like our indigenous Lepcha community in Sikkim who are opposing to halt the construction of the proposed 520 MW Teesta Stage IV hydropower project.

If successful, this will be the fifth project the community would have successfully stopped in Sikkim – element of a mounting wave of anti-dam movements across north eastern India.

Lepchas say that their religious beliefs are at the core of their resistance to the power projects in Dzongu. They believe the place where the race Lepcha was created and Khangchendzonga is their mother mountain where their souls eventually get salvation.

Such narratives inspire me to tell their stories in urban spectrum and spread the message of 'Live and let others live'.

## Conclusion

The storytellers wish to render the GEN Y to be 'emphatic listeners and voracious readers' to become thriving storytellers. As Shakespeare aptly said, "Give me the ear and not the voice." They believe one should have fervour to take it up as a profession then rest will be taken care of. They urge to remember that the World is a market, you are a product, so you have to sell your stories and package it in such a way that it sells. So storytelling is here to stay. The author has provided the list of ancient rural oral storytelling traditions still practised in the state of West Bengal. The glimpse that is provided in this paper focus that there are such innumerable treasures practised in the different states of India that prove that there is no dearth of such rich customs and storytellers present in every state of our country. There are a few urban storytellers/ researchers who work closely to document such rare oral traditions. So, the revival of storytelling has an immense future through both modern techniques like teleconferencing and traditional oral art forms. All that matter is prolific human interface that will pave the world to be a better place.

## Acknowledgement

1. Buddhadeb Barman, PHD scholar, Department of Film Studies, Jadavpur University, Kolkata .
2. This author interviewed Kavita Gupta, who is a member of Indian storytelling Network in Kolkata who closely work with the young children.
3. This author has taken interview of another storyteller of Kolkata for her personal blog <https://jhumpaspeaks.wordpress.com/>, Priyanka Chatterjee

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