

## Tell me a story

The idea of stories or narratives as a tool for social communication has been in existence since the times of Aristotle's Poetics (350 BC). It is certainly no stranger to India, where didactic fables have been the most popular and effective method of passing on socio-cultural and religious norms and mores across generations. India's great epics Ramayana and Mahabharata are nothing but magnificent stories with thousands of sub-stories, each with its particular moral. The tradition is not new to China either, where it is believed to date back to a thousand years; the Han dynasty in 202 BC.

The philosopher Roland Barthes says, "Narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society; it is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself." And a New York Times article from 2007 asserts - Researchers have found that the human brain has a natural affinity for narrative construction. People tend to remember facts more accurately if they encounter them in a story rather than in a list.

It was to celebrate this that India's first major storytelling festival was organized a couple of weeks ago (the weekend of October 7,8) in Mumbai. The list of storytellers (or shall we call them performers) included thespian Naseeruddin Shah who narrated from famed feminist writer Ismat Chughtai's Lajjo. According to advertising professional MS Gopal who attended the festival, the repertoire was wide, ranging from "the music and stories of gypsies from the UK to tales from Kerala. There were love stories from French Quebec and there were politically inspired stories like the Dastangois as well as sweet children stories from Spain." He particularly liked the Dastangoi form, which refers to the recitation of a *dastan* (story), an art form possibly brought in from Persia.

"All old cultures, especially Asian, have a rich tradition of storytelling," says Anita Ratnam, performer and scholar from Chennai. In China, as in India, storytelling is essentially a performing art where tales from epics endemic to the culture or great love stories are passed on through the generations. To see how well stories travel through regions, take the example of the Ramayana (the story of Lord Rama); it has made its way from India to the near and far East. The Ramayana was celebrated recently in Singapore during their international storytelling festival (September).

According to Ratnam, if we in India have a Ramayana, with the ever-lovable monkey God Hanuman, then China has a legendary Monkey King, whose exploits (not always pleasant) are known to every child in the country. Drawing this example further, she says, "One of the primary similarities between Indian and Chinese traditions of storytelling is the use of animals in their tales, especially those of a didactic nature."

What makes stories so special is that across societies and cultures, their core remains the same: they are entertaining while being educational, and like food, they travel easily. Little wonder then that recently, the Independent (UK) reported that an Irish boy won a Chinese story-telling competition!