



The story of her life

Geeta Dharmarajan grew up surrounded by stories. Anjali Bhargava on how her organisation, Katha, has changed scores of children's lives through its retellings

Few will even recognise the name Sengalipuram Anantarama Dikshitar. One of the great storytellers in Tamil, Dikshitar often held his sessions at temples in Tamil Nadu, earning a modest living from his enthralling story-telling.

It was at her neighbourhood temple, the Shiva Vishnu Kovil in Chennai's Mambalam, that Geeta Dharmarajan first heard Dikshitar, a man who could "weave magic with his words". He could bring the past into the present, move effortlessly between geographies, time zones, distant and present cultures. He would link today's happenings with tales of yore, bringing alive characters of the *Mahabharata* or *Ramayana* and drawing comparisons with today's politicians or public figures. The roly-poly repository of rich stories influenced the young girl's mind in ways more profound than she realised at the time.

Dharmarajan's two most vivid memories shaped what she has received considerable acclaim for: the founder of Katha (literally, "story"), a non-profit organisation committed to bringing forgotten and regional language stories alive. Her first indelible memory is of going to the temple around the corner from her home as a young child, every day without fail, come rain or shine, hell or high water.

Second, she remembers listening to Katha Kalakshepam (traditional story-telling) sessions at the temple. The stories related to mythology, featuring gods, animals, kingdoms and battles but were also always woven with politics and often involved song and dance. "I remember falling asleep on the floor of the temple with my head full of those stories," she says. She sat in the temple till after midnight on nights such as Shivaratri, nodding off at some point. At other times she recalls listening to these stories perched atop her grandfather's commodious belly, which convulsed with laughter during the sessions, shaking the

child's body along with him in the process. At the end of the story, a plate would go around and everyone would put some money in it — those were the earnings of the day for the story-teller.

Dharmarajan had the traditional upbringing of Brahmin girls in Tamil Nadu — steeped in literature, trained in classical dance and music, celebrating festivals with gusto. Though a life of caste privilege, being financially middle-class meant there were never any extras to be had. She recalls her mother dipping into the "Tirupati hundi" to find a few rupees to buy vegetables at the end of every month. Meals were often had from large shared plates. Her grandmother would put a bite each in every child's mouth — rice with sambar. "There was always a focus on giving and sharing. But my grandmother always said I couldn't give till my hands were big enough to do so," says she. Dharmarajan's hands would get very capacious indeed, but that was much later.

Meanwhile, she grew up, got married at 21 and had two children — a normal life trajectory for a traditional Ayyar girl. But, married and translocated to Delhi, she started to work at children's magazine *Target*. Although she never really planned on a career, she soon found herself writing and enjoying her work at the magazine.

In 1983, Dharmarajan's bureaucrat husband was accepted for a PhD programme in the US and she and her children accompanied him. They soon found though that they couldn't afford to live there just on his stipend. It was then that Dharmarajan started working for *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, a high-quality publication that allowed her to both support her family and explore her creative side. When the family returned to Delhi, she found herself pulled into a new project — a chil-

dren's magazine called *Tamasha* for Unicef.

The years of writing for *The Pennsylvania Gazette* had sowed an idea in her head. Working there, Dharmarajan had been exposed to the power of translation. And few knew better than her the wealth of stories in India's regional tales — she'd grown up with Tamil ones ringing daily in her ears — and how little of it reached the rest of the country. Dharmarajan started considering ways to reveal the world of Tamil tales to non-Tamil speaking audiences, of opening a rich treasure trove for all to enjoy.

In 1988-89, Dharmarajan founded Katha as a not-for-profit organisation devoted to making regional legends, folktales and stories of India available to everyone across languages. The *Katha Prize Stories* came into being at the same time. Till 1991,

Dharmarajan was a one-person army. But soon, the organisation started to grow and acquired its own momentum. Translations were what they started out doing — one of the most edifying ways of bringing the country together, and make people have conversations with each other across regions, communities and languages.

Even as Katha found its feet, Dharmarajan came in contact with Manjit Singh, then commissioner of the slum wing of DDA (Delhi Development Authority). Their discussions led her to start working in Govindpuri, one of the city's largest slum clusters at the time and the one with the most number of out-of-school children.

Govindpuri delivered a severe shock to Dharmarajan. She was horrified at how little the children here had. "It was a different world from Tamil Nadu, where even though there was widespread poverty, children had some basics available to them," she explains. Growing up wrapped up in cotton wool, she says, she had never seen such an abject situation and didn't even know it existed till she

found herself in Govindpuri.

By 1990, she started the Katha Lab School (KLS) in Govindpuri with five children. A bigger hurdle than educating children here was dealing with parents who were too preoccupied with their subsistence concerns to see the value of schooling for their wards.

In 2001, Katha started a mobile school called the *Tamasha Roadshow*. The vans that housed these "schools" were given permission to be parked by the road. In 2003, they started BOW-WOW — Books On Wheels and Workshops On wheels in 22 slums. By 2010, the initiative had spread to 100-odd slums. The idea was to get the children excited about books and reading and then help them get admission into the nearest government school. Slowly but surely, every year around 1,000 children were getting mainstreamed.

In 2008, the Delhi government asked Katha to work with it in its schools. Katha now works in 700 government schools. In 2014-15, the Municipal Corporation of Delhi gave Katha three of its schools to run; these were selected as the best in their district in a subsequent ranking. In addition, Katha has a reading programme currently running in 101 government schools. The KLS school in Govindpuri is a delight to visit and an institution in itself in the slum. The success stories of the school are wide and varied — impossible to recount in a single article. In July 2018, a second campus started in Noida. A total of 2,200 children are enrolled in the two KLSs.

More recently, Katha has embarked on 300M, a programme that targets 150 million school children who cannot read at grade level. The organisation has 115 full-time staffers, nearly a quarter of whom have been with it for over 15 years. With a salary parity of 1:12 and average age of 35, Dharmarajan has a strong and loyal team in place. With more schools coming under its fold and more books and translations on its plate than ever, Dharmarajan's is one story that's far from over.

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