

LIFE & STYLE

# Listen to Shobha Tharoor Srinivasan narrate evergreen stories from India



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Shobha Tharoor Srinivasan | Photo Credit: Ajosh Parackan

**Stories of Tenali Rama, popular fables from the Panchatantra and the Jataka tales come alive in her evocative story-telling sessions on her YouTube channel**

There is something about stories from the Panchatantra that has made them a favourite read of generations of children. Many such collections of Indian fables, folk tales and stories have become part of our growing up and stood the test of time. For 70 days of the lockdown, author and voice artiste Shobha Tharoor Srinivasan had been narrating stories about Tenali Rama and stories from the

Panchatantra and the Jataka tales.

In an email interview, she talks about the relevance of the stories and how they still charm children with their wit and wisdom. Edited excerpts.

**Why did you decide to narrate tales from the Panchatantra, the Jataka tales and Tenali Rama during the lockdown?**

I wanted to help in some way during the lockdown, and as a professional voice-over talent and a published author of children's books, a read-aloud project was something I could do and sustain for 70 days.

I've been feeling for a while that many Indian children are not aware of these interesting Indian classics. Book stores often carry more books from the Western canon. Stories written almost 2,000 years ago like the Panchatantra stories or the Jataka tales merited a revisit. I grew up with these stories, and I still remember many of the lessons I learned. That says something about their lasting value. I included stories of Tenali Rama because he is part of a South Indian story-telling tradition and may not be familiar to some listeners.

**Do you think that these tales about anthropomorphic characters resonate with tech-savvy children today?**

Stories open young minds to new worlds. Even if children are tech-involved, a good story is always compelling. These stories educate and inspire with lessons for daily life and I thought that parents would buy in more easily to screen time if the stories did more than just entertain. Also, since children are curious and fond of animals, and many share their homes and hearts with pets, stories about adventurous rats, wily wolves, courageous hares, clever turtles etc. would likely appeal. Anthropomorphic characters are a useful literary device. Stories that feature animals with human traits assure an emotional distance when the lesson is painful.

**You have associated with danseuse Rajashree Warriar for a series that has her dancing to a story that you narrate, again mostly from the Panchatantra. What was the process like?**

The 'Great Indian Story' project was the vision of MR Hari of Invis Multimedia. It is a unique and ambitious project that uses the synergy of sound and movement to provide children a platform to open their minds to timeless tales while also learning the aesthetics of dance. Rajashree Warriar uses the mastery of her craft and Bharatanatyam mudras to visually illustrate the story, while I use my voice to dramatically narrate the words.

**Is there a favourite story or character in the stories?**

I enjoyed sharing each and every story as most were distinct, and the lessons they imparted, quite different. It was interesting to review analytics and see that the stories from all three sources resonated equally with listeners. *The Barber who Received a Promotion* from the Tenali Rama collection, *The Sage and the Mouse* from the Panchatantra, and *The Penny-wise Monkey* from the Jataka Tales all had more than 1,000 viewers.

**What was the response of the viewers?**

The response has been wonderful. I've had warm notes from parents saying how much their children have enjoyed the stories. There were also some creative "Thank You's" rendered artistically on social media, and many adults wrote in saying that they had relived childhood memories by listening to these familiar stories of their youth.

**As a much-sought-after voice artiste, what would you like to share with people hoping to take this up?**

It's important first to understand the term 'voice artiste'. It's not just about having a clear or pleasant voice. It's about how that voice is used. The recorded voice is the voice actor's calling card and it can be, and often is, distinctly different from the live voice. In some ways, a voice artiste is a compassionate, intelligent 'storyteller.' And sometimes, the story may not be fun to narrate. The script can be dry, too technical, poorly worded, yet the task of the voice talent is to use skills to convey that text and then add a surprising element that makes the listener want to hear the script again. This must also be accomplished within specific time constraints. You have to be able to get a point across, relate a feeling, and nail the message in 30 seconds, or two minutes or the time stipulated.

Having said that, it's a wonderful profession with a fair bit of flexibility and the luxury of being able to work in your pajamas if you are recording from a home studio! The key talents required for voice-over are credibility (which is sincerity in your rendering of the material), comprehension of the intended script, and the voice and communication ability to narrate material. The rest can be learned from classes or with a professional coach.

**What future do you see for audio books and plain narration in the era of visual images?**

There's always been a space for audio books. It's a hands-free way to read, and, in our busy lives of long commutes and endless chores, a simple way to keep up our reading while driving to work, folding laundry, or cooking a meal. I read that in America, 50% of children under the age of 12 have already listened to audio books. A generation in India used to devices and accustomed to listening to music and podcasts on their headphones will also find it easy to 'read' books this way. And I know that the right voice, with the right tonality, pitch and expression, will paint images in listeners' minds and bring books alive just as well as visual images can.