

life

Kahaanis and kathas...

Storytelling with Masters Eintou Pearl Springer and Raviji

It is one of the world's oldest artforms. Stories can instill a value system into a people through the messages and lessons communicated. It provides a connection to the past as traditions are inherited from the routines or practices of the characters, and like most other artistic expressions, its reach transcends the barriers of gender, race, and socioeconomics.

The storyteller himself or herself becomes part of our memory of a tale; one's expression and intonation can take a story from being mediocre to unforgettable. Storytelling has undoubtedly been a popular pastime in T&T and has played an integral role in shaping our cultural landscape, with calypsoes, pichakarees (East Indian social commentary songs), and the spoken word all taking their cue from the elements of this tradition.

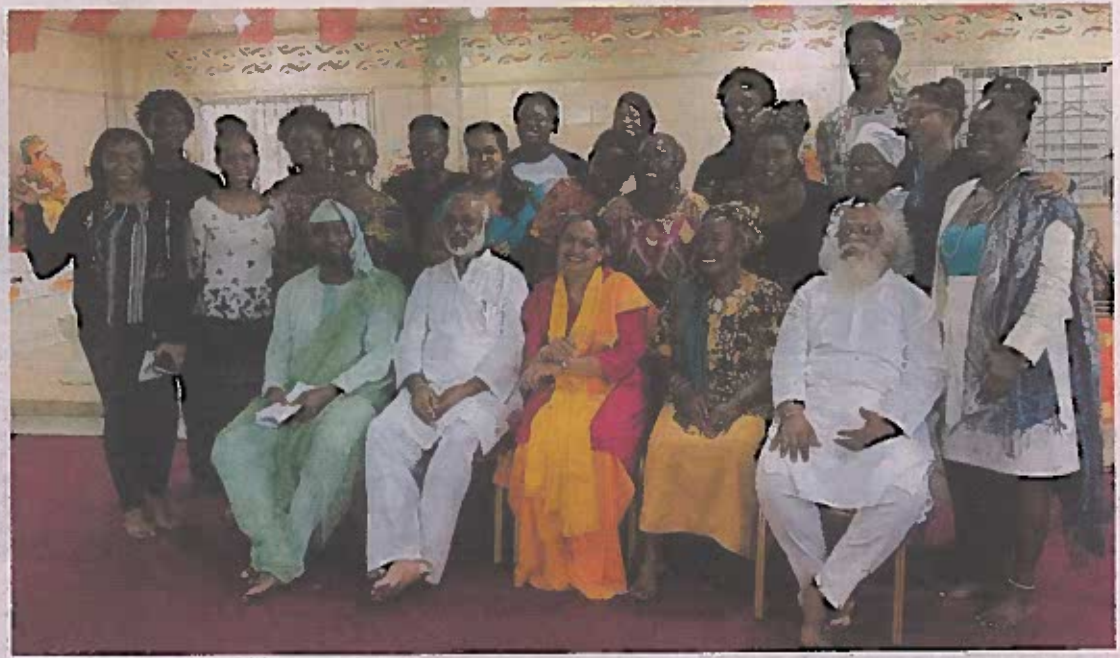
Eintou Pearl Springer is no stranger to the local storytelling community. Apart from being the brainchild of our National Heritage Library at Nalis, a recipient of the Hummingbird (Silver) Medal for her contribution to the arts, and helping to mould this country's literary and theatre foundations, Springer is a Master when it comes to storytelling. For these

reasons she was chosen as the Mentor to facilitate a short programme on 'The Art and Practice of Storytelling' for this year's Mentoring by the Masters Programme of the Ministry of Community Development, Culture and the Arts.

On Saturday, June 2, Springer and her fellow mentees journeyed to Gilibia Trace in Raghunanan Road, Chaguanas, to share in the East Indian storytelling experience. The destination - the Hindu Prachaar Kendra, where Springer and longtime colleague Raviji, a past Mentor himself and cultural activist, teamed up to deliver a discourse featuring the Kahaanis (tales) and kathas (discourses from ancient religious texts) of the East Indian tradition.

To appreciate the kahaani, Seeromani Maharaj-Narinesingh of the Kendra sang a soul-stirring Pichakaree (Mission to the Caribbean), where Dharti Maataa (Mother Earth) is sending the jahajis (ancestors) to the Caribbean, whispering to them to build a legacy in their new home. The song provides recollections of the indentureship struggles and, despite these hardships, Dharti Maataa implores her

Pavitra Jaimungal shares a Kahaani with the mentees during the Mentoring by the Masters East Indian storytelling sessions at the Hindu Prachaar Kendra. PICTURES MINISTRY



Front row, from left, Babalawo Olatunji Somorin (Orisha Community); Raviji and Geeta Vaahini (Hindu Prachaar Kendra); Mentor Eintou Pearl Springer and Lakpath ji (Chair of the Programme) with mentees during the Mentoring by the Masters East Indian storytelling session, held at the Hindu Prachaar Kendra.

worshippers to "sow good sanskaar (virtues) in every parivaar (family)." The entire chapter of our country's indentureship journey was captured in these few verses, and the mentees were able to develop an appreciation of the Pichakaree artform from this rendition.

Pavitra Jaimungal also presented one of her many fascinating Kahaanis (tales) at the session, dressed in her signature dress and orhni (shawl) pinned in the traditional manner as worn by our female East Indian ancestors. She is one of the few, if not the only person in the country, with the ability to replicate a hybrid language of the World



War era where English married Hindi and Bhojpuri.

Jaimungal has been trained to present stories depicting the life and times of this historic period, and one would find similarities of her style in the song "Rosie gyal what yuh cooking for dinner." The Mentees themselves were certainly appreciative of this rare opportunity to travel back in time and share in the storytelling tradition of this era.

One of the most common forms of storytelling in the East Indian diaspora is the Ramayan Katha, and an excerpt was presented by Geeta Vaahini, President of the Kendra, to bring closure to the session.

The Mentees were fascinated by Vaahini's recollection of one of Hanuman's (the incarnation of strength) encounters as he journeyed to Lanka, and even eagerly chimed in on the "Jai Kaar" (proclamation of victory). Using her presentation as a reference, Raviji reiterated the importance of facial expressions and hand gestures used to bring to life the energy and

sentiments of a story.

In her concluding remarks, Springer shared one of the reasons why stories survived throughout history, and used the example of the Akan tribe of Ghana who perpetuated the Anansi stories - "there is a link between resistance and cultural survival. The Akan people were the most warlike people who were brought to the Caribbean, and they waged war from Suriname, to Tobago, the Bahamas, Antigua, Jamaica, Barbados, and in Suriname... When the Akan people went to war, they had their symbols and went with the strength of their culture, to die or to be victorious".

The lesson to be learnt here; always have pride in one's culture.

Whether it was through war, or aboard indentureship vessels to the Caribbean from India, the stories that came to these shores have certainly left a lasting impression on the minds of our past, present and future generations. The Mentoring by the Masters Programme has a responsibility to cradle these traditions and to ensure that next wave of Masters do justice to the various cultural artforms in T&T. The mentees expressed their gratitude for this "eye opening" experience, and all sat together with the Kendra family for a meal of pholourie and pepper roti.

Hindu Prachaar Kendra president Geeta Vaahini delivers a Katha to the mentees during the Mentoring by the Masters East Indian storytelling session at the Hindu Prachaar Kendra.