

Bharatanatyam and the forest of stories

I love stories. And I fear I've been in a permanent state of anecdote, with its implied precondition of dotage, for at least 25 years now. Yet even before that, I loved stories. It doesn't matter if the story is classified as a 'true' one or 'fictional'; if it's well told — or even if it's not well told but has the potential to be well told — I'll be hooked. Even the fragment of a story visible on an envelope that was once a newspaper, with operative parts of key sentences tantalisingly folded and glued away, has the power to set off the imagination and linger in the memory like a gem.

As a dancer, I love to tell stories using the hand gestures and postures of Bharatanatyam.

Stories have a life of their own. A 'true' story can never be the same for any two people, because every listener perceives it in an individual capacity, colouring and nuancing it according to personal proclivities. So where is the one true story? And then there's 'fiction' — frequently underrated and sometimes used as a synonym for untruth. When we vibe with the fictional characters of movies or novels, shed tears at their anguish and laugh at their antics, when we dwell on their dilemmas long after the show is over, we're seeing reflections of our own lives there. And you can't get more real than real life. So 'fiction' is real too, sometimes telling a lot more truths than non-fiction.

Stories are like plants. They grow, they get transplanted and put down new roots, they send out shoots in different directions and get cross-pollinated too.

I think maybe stories are like forests too. I love to roam in a story. In telling a story through dance, when the vocalist and instrumentalists weave raga and tala together to create a vale of safety as it were, the dancer enters the forest and takes a particular path to explore the forest. How the story unfolds that day, which characters you meet, will depend on which path you select.

I hope I always have the privilege of roaming in the friendly forests of stories. Yes, my forests are friendly — or shall I say, the paths I have chosen so far have always taken me to friendly groves. I can't say where they will take me in the future, but I do think that they will take me towards hope, no matter what troubles I find on the way.

All said and done, those are the kind of stories I love — the ones that have plenty of conflict, but in which the protagonist does find the light at the end of

the proverbial tunnel. Because if art is a mirror that reflects everything in this world, it is also a versatile mirror. Its versatility lies in its being able to show not only what is but also what can be.

In today's world, many things that exist should not exist in a civilised culture. As artists it's our duty to face them and examine them through the lens of our individual art, to see what explanations, what solutions can be found. It's at these times that our mirror might be able to reflect what can be.

I use the words 'might' and 'may' often. I think after all, doubt is not such a bad thing, contrary to what the conventional image makers might want to advise us. Doubts can lead to explorations and deeper understanding. And in a world of polarised opinions where every 'right' is trying to commandeer might, perhaps doubt — or shall we say 'benefit of the doubt' — is one of the balms we need.