

Success story of a storyteller bear

Chennai-based book publisher Karadi Tales explores new path to make English learning an intuitive experience for kids, writes **TE Narasimhan**

“If you want your children to be intelligent, read them fairy tales. If you want them to be more intelligent, read them more fairy tales,” Albert Einstein once said. Children love listening to stories. No wonder, storytelling is a crucial part of raising a child in India — not only to inculcate social and moral values but also for parents and grandparents to spend quality time with the kids.

Technology has created new ways to entertain and educate children with stories, breaking the barriers like language and place. This is the space where Karadi Tales operates. Karadi means bear in Tamil, Malayalam and Kannada. So Karadi Tales, quite literally, is a bear telling stories and taking children and their parents on magical journey with audio books, picture books, iPad apps and video books.

Brainchild of former Thermax employee CP Viswanath, Shobha Viswanath and C P Narayan, Karadi Tales introduces Indian culture and heritage to children through storytelling. It has come a long way since its start in 1996. Karadi Path, an offshoot of Karadi Tales, is now a registered company, operating in about 1,200 schools, across the country, reaching 300,000 students. It runs English learning courses and has trained 6,000 teachers.

The idea of Karadi Tales originated in 1993, when Viswanath and wife Shobha returned to India with their five-year-old son after spending nearly seven years in the US. The couple tried to buy him books

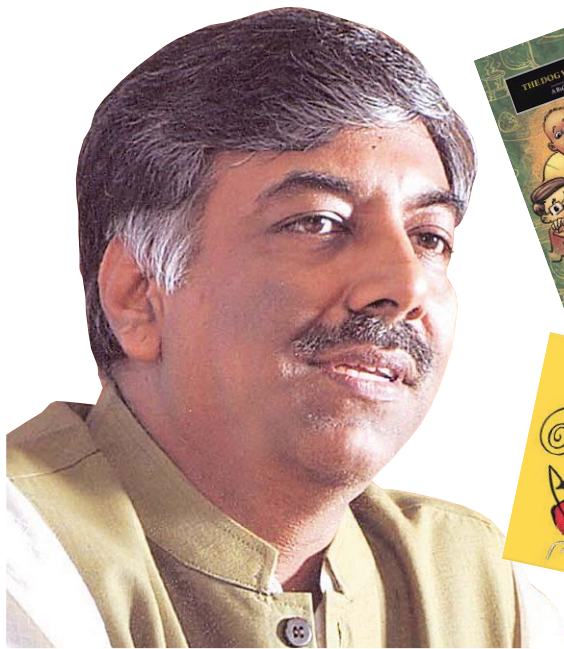
to develop his reading habit. However, upon realising there were not many well-produced books and audio books, they decided to produce and market audio books.

Started with an objective of providing original Indian content with an Indian context to children, Karadi has explored a new path by tying up with schools and familiarising children with English.

The company believes the best way to teach language to kids is to provide them the right environment, especially with rural and underprivileged sections. Through Karadi Path Education, it helps kids adapt the language rather than teaching it in traditional ways. Karadi Path Education has developed techniques to introduce English to children within 96 hours, helping them understand the stories and learn more.

Karadi Tales launched its first title in 1996. It is now one of the largest-selling children publications in the country. Most of its titles have sold 10,000 copies, with a few crossing the 20,000 mark. “Each title of Karadi Tales has gone into reprint in less than 12 months of release,” Viswanath says. “Audio books are a powerful tool for language development, bridging the gap between visual communication and the written word.”

Currently with about 60 titles in its catalogue and more under production, Karadi Tales has brought together some of India’s finest artistes, including Naseeruddin Shah, Gulzar, Girish Karnad, Usha Uthup, Nandita Das,



Idea of Karadi Tales originated in 1993, when CP Viswanath (pictured) and wife Shobha returned to India after spending nearly 7 years in the US

Nassar, Manna Dey, Udit Narayan, SP Balasubramaniam, Shankar Mahadevan, Vidya Balan, Jaaved Jaferi and Boman Irani.

Publishing house ACK Media, which owns children’s comic book titles *Amar Chitra Katha* and *Tinkle*, bought around 51 per cent of Karadi Tales in 2008. A year later, venture capital fund Aavishkaar picked up a substantial stake in Karadi Path Education. More good news came when Series-A funding was received from Pearson Affordable Learning Fund (PALF). The Viswanaths and their team have always been leading the success of Karadi Tales, says one of

the investors. “The creative perspective of Karadi Tales was always the Vishwanath couple. We were the back-end managers handling the marketing, PR and distribution,” says Manas Mohan, chief executive officer of Amar Chitra Katha.

“As a brand and a product line, Karadi is easily one of the best publishers in the country for children. As far as Amar Chitra Katha and Tinkle are concerned, it was a natural choice for us to bring them under one group,” Mohan says, adding the quality of the story and expression, including the audio presentation, are attractive.

schools often find difficult to source — quality content, along with derivative language learning processes and tools that enable language learning the way we learn our mother tongue, using the rich library built up by Karadi Tales over 20 years. I believe Karadi Path is destined to be very successful.

Sayoni Basu is director at Duckbill, a publishing house for children and young adults



FACT BOX

Area of business: Training kids in English learning

Funding: \$2.3 million from Pearson Affordable Learning Fund in 2015

₹8 crore from Aavishkaar Fund in 2012

Turnover: ₹12 crore (2015–16)

Reach: 1,200 schools and 300,000 students

The education-focused startup has also developed a methodology to make English learning easier for students through actions, emotions and drama. The idea of Karadi Path struck in 2000 when some non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Dharavi slums of Mumbai invited Vishwanath to see how the kids were responding to Karadi Tales. “In Dharavi, I saw kids talking in three languages but English was still a challenge for them,” says Vishwanath.

This triggered him to study why English learning was difficult, while picking up the mother tongue or an Indian language was much easier. It

took the founders nearly 10 years to develop a methodology, which de-constructed how the mother tongue is learnt and reconstructed from that a process for intuitive and experiential English learning in classrooms. “Language cannot be learnt through instruction, word meanings and grammar. Unfortunately, that is the core of English instruction in schools. Language learning must be 100 per cent derivative. You grasp it from experiences and exposure in conversations,” Vishwanath says. “I will give a child a lot of opportunities to guess what I am saying. A mother uses facial and voice expressions and hand gestures to communicate with a child.”

Having raised funds in a seed round and a Series-A funding round, Karadi is planning to expand its reach to more institutions, also directly reach parents and children. The company has evolved process of teaching English through gestures, music and dance. The Karadi Path method eschews the usage of text-books, and works through songs that have a language learning structure embedded. “Indians should have been the ones to develop the pedagogy for linguistic learning,” says Vishwanath.

Karadi Path currently works with rural, tribal, and corporate funded schools, primarily in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. Its product for colleges has been tested and is being implemented in two institutions. The company is working with micro tutors in cluster centres and also looking at giving solutions through mobile phones. It expects to reach at least 6,000 institutions in the next two years and a million students.

The company is confident of the effectiveness of its methods and will look to scale up not only within India but also in Southeast Asia, Netherlands, China, Sri Lanka and Pakistan. Karadi Path’s revenues have grown from ₹13 lakh in the first year to ₹12 crore in 2015-16. Vishwanath expects to close the next year with a turnover of ₹30 crore.

EXPERT TAKE



I have long been an admirer of books created by Karadi Tales, and their commitment to quality (as seen in the impeccable production values, artwork and writing of their books). Their ability to stay ahead of the curve has been demonstrated through their audio books, created when no one else in the Indian market was producing audio books for

children, the animated films they have made and the short videos they have created for YouTube. The greatest challenge in publishing books for children in India is finding the market. The percentage of discerning readership is quite small when it comes to Indian products, which have no obvious academic connect — far too many parents chose cheap, strictly academic or foreign products. Karadi Path is providing what