

## **The road less travelled Sustainable walking tour business in Chennai**

### **Section 1**

Chennai, or Madras as it was known from 1653 to 1996, is India's fourth largest city, made up of a vast assortment of villages which grew beyond their boundaries in the early seventeenth century when the East India Company leased land from the reigning ruler and constructed the Fort St George.<sup>1</sup> Today, Chennai is a city where the traditional and modern blend. From traditional vegetarian to fast foods, old saris to the latest fashion, from ancient temple architecture to modern sky scrapers, classical music and dance to throbbing disco beats - Chennai has them all and many more. "Every street of Madras has as story to tell."<sup>2</sup>

In the early 2000s, local young entrepreneur Vijay Prabhat Kamalakara noticed that when his IT company bosses hosted visitors the accepted practice was to hire a cab and take them to all the routine hot spots. "I realised that they were missing out on the essence of the city. I wanted travellers to experience the way of life here - our customs, dances and traditions. And I felt it would be a viable business model so I decided to take the plunge," he says.<sup>3</sup>

Storytrails was born five years ago out of the idea that Indian travel destinations are to be experienced, and not just seen. It is an attempt to dig out the stories behind ordinary everyday city sights, and give visitors a glimpse into the local way of life, using such stories as the medium. This case study does not describe a public-private partnership as such but rather a successful, sustainable creative industry based in Chennai but which now, through partnerships with other organisations, has extended to Delhi, Lucknow, Hyderabad, Bangalore and Mumbai, with the aim of having a pan-India footprint in the next two years.

### **Section 2**

The audience, the context and the subjects change each time but Storytrails main purpose remains the same – to tell stories. The objectives that flow from that core mission are as follows:

- Keeping storytelling relevant: Stories range from the traditional to those based on science and everyday life. And they appeal to everyone from the discerning traveller to a distracted 6 year old.
- Giving storytelling a practical driver for sustainability: Using storytelling as a tool for effective communication. The pull and constant feedback from the market keeps storytelling efforts ongoing and sustainable.
- Organised efforts for scalability and wider reach: Storytrails trains articulate individuals from diverse academic and professional backgrounds to become storytellers enabling them to reach out to a much larger audience than any single storyteller would be able to. Success is based not on individual brilliance alone but on the strength on the organisation backing that individual.<sup>4</sup>

### **Section 3**

Storytrails started in December 2006 with just Vijay at the helm, and has now grown to a committed team of 15 storytellers from backgrounds as varied as engineers, teachers, students and artists. "The main challenge I faced when I set out with Storytrails was to get others to believe in my idea. For that, I needed to sound convincing. It took me months to fine tune the idea and to give it the shape it has taken now," says Vijay. "I also had

problems to find the right core team but eventually the concept itself attracted people. There were a lot of trials and errors but now we know how to handle the business," he adds.

Vijay had to risk his savings to start this venture but he admits the idea is not investment intensive. "It relies more on intellectual capital. And though I'm not from a business background, my family and friends did support me. Now my biggest source of inspiration is that the team I picked has stuck with me."<sup>5</sup>

The key to a successful and sustainable business model is ensuring that the trails bring benefit to all those involved – visitors, visited and storytellers. For example, homeowners might be paid for visits, given gifts or donations made to charity. Groups are small and visits are as unobtrusive as possible. Similarly Storytrails seeks to bring benefit to local market stallholders, astrologers and dance groups involved in the trails.<sup>6</sup>

Having tried various different pay structures, storytellers are now paid a fixed rate which is benchmarked against related professions such as teaching and media. They also receive a podium allowance.<sup>7</sup> Word of mouth appreciation has helped the company to grow and Storytrails now features in Lonely Planet<sup>8</sup> and on Trip Advisor. It also caters for consulates, top hotels, leading schools and cruise ships. One might have thought that the growth of Storytrails could lead to a certain loss of the very essence of what makes the personalised, private-feeling trails so popular, but on the contrary, the model seems to be able to flex in a way which other providers are not able to.<sup>9</sup>

#### **Section 4**

"Our idea is not rocket science and is a simple concept based on a traditional performing art. But we believe we have done well in identifying its business potential and executing it such that it makes commercial sense and is sustainable. Our strength today lies not in the fact that we have so many scripted trails, but in the fact that we have a streamlined system that enables us to repeatedly design and deliver such trails, each time with a different theme, different audience and with a different storyteller, but always with the same great feedback," says Vijay.<sup>10</sup> One outcome of the initiative is that Storytrails are now talking to local government about doing more to identify and conserve heritage. Indeed there is anecdotal evidence that homeowners feel more proud of their surroundings, make more effort to upkeep their property and are happier to continue living in historic buildings because of Storytrails.<sup>11</sup> More tangible community benefits include exposure to a wider audience for the dance schools and direct sales for jewellery makers and other market stallholders. Storytrails founder, Vijay Prabhat Kamalakara, won the British Council's Young Creative Entrepreneur award in 2011.<sup>12</sup>

#### **Section 5**

There has been much talk of India's creative industries in recent years, but this tends to focus on entertainment, design and publishing. Indeed the entertainment industry is one of the fastest growing sectors in India, with estimated revenues of around US\$ 10.7 billion in 2011.<sup>13</sup> Demands for creativity in business are opening up opportunities for entrepreneurs like Vijay however, who has cleverly linked heritage and entertainment in his business model for Storytrails. We learn from his story that:

- Heritage walks can make good and profitable business and do not have to be the domain of ngos, local government or tour operators
- Even if it takes a while to be taken seriously, a good idea and a solid business plan can win through.

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Vijay recommends that:

- State governments should not be running their own guided tours but should instead concentrate on improvements to amenities and infrastructure.
- By providing a reason (social and economic) for homeowners to remain in and look after their historic residences, Storytrails demonstrates that it is possible to keep these places intact and whilst sustainability is not one of the company's aims, it is a valuable by-product of their creative activity.<sup>14</sup>

***Section 6:***

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***Section 7***

<sup>1</sup> Kamath, Rina Chennai A Disha Guide, Longman 2000 p i

<sup>2</sup> Rai, Raghunath Themes in Indian History, Delhi 2010-11 p 259

<sup>3</sup> Magazine article quote on Storytrails website <http://www.storytrails.in/InThePress/30.html>

<sup>4</sup> *Storytrails: An Introduction*, Vijay Prabhat Kamalakara

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.storytrails.in/InThePress/30.html>

<sup>6</sup> Author's conversation with Vijay Prabhat Kamalakara, 15 June 2012

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> "...highly recommended neighbourhood walking tours", Lonely Planet, quoted in Storytrails literature

<sup>9</sup> Author's conversation with Vijay Prabhat Kamalakara, 15 June 2012

<sup>10</sup> *Storytrails: Some FAQs*, Vijay Prabhat Kamalakara

<sup>11</sup> Author's conversation with Vijay Prabhat Kamalakara, 15 June 2012

<sup>12</sup> British Council website <http://www.britishcouncil.org/india-arts-type-award.htm>

<sup>13</sup> Ibid <http://blog.britishcouncil.org.in/2011/07/05/indias-creative-industries/>

<sup>14</sup> Author's conversation with Vijay Prabhat Kamalakara, 15 June 2012

***Author profile***

Catherine Leonard joined the UK National Trust in 1999, when she was responsible for the Trust's work with overseas heritage groups and managing the European Network of National Heritage Organisations. Catherine now heads the INTO Secretariat and is the strategic lead for the organisation's international co-ordination, including resource management, programme development,

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The Role of Public-Private Partnerships***

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communications and relationships with INTO members, other ngos, policy makers and institutions worldwide. Catherine studied languages and literature at university and has spent time living and working abroad. Prior to joining the National Trust, Catherine worked for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. She visited India in 2010.