

Study Of Development And Issues Of Children's Literature In India

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Date of Submission: 12-01-2023

Date of Acceptance: 24-01-2023

ABSTRACT

A Psychoanalytic Study of Childhood and Society in India (1982) makes a detailed analysis of the development of the Indian child in history and literature. In the Indian literary tradition, classical Sanskrit literature is one of the earliest to describe children and childhood. The child that we find in these descriptions is more of a wish fulfilment—a couple's or more often a father's—longing for progeny that carries the lineage forward (implying therefore a son more than a daughter). Literature thereby abounds in waxing lyrical about the joy of a father who realizes his dream of parental happiness through his off-spring. The child is thus more of an object of adoration rather than an individual with the capacity to feel or react; its separate identity is never carved out of that of its parents, more importantly that of its father. King Rama's love for his two sons Lava and Kusha and Prabhakarvardhan's love for his son, Harsha, are beautifully rendered in verses by Bhavabhuti and Banbhata respectively. It is only in Kalidasa that we find any mention of the love and affection of a father for his girl child in the depiction of sage Kanva's love for his daughter Shakuntala. Not only Sanskrit literature but medieval regional literatures like Hindi also abound with rich accounts of children and childhood. The Bhakti movement, particularly the songs of Surdas on Krishna's childhood and that of Tulsidas on Rama's childhood, portray a detailed description of childhood, especially that of the male child.

Keywords: Children's Literature, English, The Children's Book Trust

I. INTRODUCTION

Emulating the west, many factions of India felt the necessity of creating a literature specifically meant for children. The sense of a cultural revolution making its presence felt across

the country made the radical thinkers infuse a sense of "Indianness" into the population. And what better place to begin with than the malleable mind of the child? But the question again arises as to who was a "child" in nineteenth century India? Victorian England was in two minds regarding the position of the child, at once protected and exploited. So too in India, the child was hung between two different mindsets. At the same time, unlike the west, the Indian child was not perceived to be a direct outcome of the fall of man. But in the present India, as in traditional India, the dichotomy was between the boy and the girl child. The boy was the centre of attraction of the whole family and flooded with affection and attention. The child, especially a boy, was the future of the family, society and of the nation too. But his first encounter with public life per se occurs during his wedding, often conducted at a very early stage in life. This makes the concept of childhood farcical and, for the girl child, cruel too. The Age of Consent Bills were themselves unsure regarding the demarcation line between a girl and a woman and more so as to the existence of any such difference. But the idea of "boyhood" was firm and early twentieth century saw the flourishing of addas which acquired a literary merit too. These were depicted with a lot of humorous amusement in the works of Bengali children's writers. While the upper class boy would receive education, the girl child suffers the same fate as her counterpart from earlier times. The taboo against education was maintained on superstitious grounds. This was not so much the case in the lower strata of society but, being financially insecure, the families invested in the education of the boy who was seen as the future bread earner (Chatterjee and Gupta 9-10). Thus it can be categorically said that when children's literature first made its beginnings in India, it was essentially a gender biased literature aimed specifically at the male child, who represents not

only the hopes and aspirations of the family but also of the nation. In such a context, the concept of national identity and Indianness reinforces itself to be treated seriously in the works for children. And to a large extent this can be seen to be the accepted trend in the early writings when children's literature in India made its beginnings mainly through the Bengali writers. Though other regions of India also produced children's literature, it was primarily in Bengal that we see a head start basically because of the close interaction of the Bengalis and the British.

Bengali Children's Literature

The earliest form of literature for children in Bengali can be traced back to the magazine *Digdarshan* (1818) which was published by the British missionaries Carey, Marshman and Ward of Serampur. Though didactic in nature, these type of works laid the foundation for future works. The School Book Society came up in 1816-17 through the efforts of the Serampur missionaries and the main aim of societies like these was the furthering the spirit of Christianity rather than literature itself. The early efforts of the society led to the publication of six works. These works like *Itihas Katha*, *Niti Katha* and such similar works did not have much literary value but despite that they were important in the sense that they were paving the way of literature for children. The new epoch in literature can be said to have started with the publication of Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar's *Betal Panchavimshati* in 1847. Vidyasagar's language infused a new spirit into the literature and led to the publication of many more books later on. But the necessity to imbibe literature with pleasure and also make readers aware of the diversity of life around them has not yet come into the writings. The moralizing attitude towards literature seem to be have ended with the publication of Jogindranath Sarkar's collection of poems and stories titled *Hasi o Khela* which primarily aimed at providing pleasure to children. The exposure to western influences that the Bengali stalwarts like Rabindranath and Abanindranath Tagore had helped them to take them as templates and lace it up with Indian legends and tales. The necessity to infuse "Indianness" led to the retelling of classics like *Shakuntala*, legends like *Rajkahani* and tales of heroism like *Katha o Kahini*. All these writings emphasized the valour and courage of our legendary heroes thereby making the child conscious of and also internalizing India's glorious past. Along with it there were adaptations of Swedish writer Selma Lagerlöf's *The Wonderful*

Adventures of Nils by Abanindranath Tagore titled *BuroAngla*. Rabindranath Tagore also wrote a dance drama for children named *Balmiki Pratibha*, several plays and stories. Children's literature soon became a flourishing industry in Bengal with a prolific output which included some very recognized names in literature of that period of time. These included Lal Bihari Dey's *Folk Tales of Bengal* (1874),

Dakshina Ranjan Mitra Majumdar's *Thakurmar Jhuli* (1901), Upendrakishore Raychaudhuri's *Tuntunir Boi* and *Ramayana for Children* (Chatterjee and Gupta 11-12). Children's literature in Bengali has made much progress in the later part of twentieth century and can boast of such well known names as Satyajit Ray, Lila Majumdar, Kishore Bharati, Sukhatara, and Ananda. This literature is significant too in the sense that it is probably the only children's literature in India that has specialist writers writing on certain specific aspects of children's literature. Thus we have a group of authors like H. Kumar Roy and S. M. Mukerji for adventure stories, Y. N. Gupta and S. Banerji for historical narratives, myth and fairy tales for Sita Devi and Shanta Devi. Animal stories are the domain of Sukumar Dey and J. Roy and Amamath specialize in science fiction.

Assamese Children's Literature

Like most children's literature, Assamese children's literature has also its origins in oral tradition and *nichukanigiti* or lullabies are most prominent examples of this tradition. The American Baptist Mission first published a collection of Assamese folktales by Mrs. Eliza Brown. The important contributors to children's literature in the nineteenth century are Gunabhiram Barua and Padmabati Devi Phukanani. Lakshminath Bezbarua's importance in Assamese children's literature is all pervasive and his *Buri Air Sadhu* (1912), *Kaka Deuta Aru Nati Lara* (1913) and *Junuka* (1913) have still remained the milestones in children's literature from Assam. Translations have also played an important part and therefore there have been significant translations like *Jnanadabhiram Barua's Dadair Paja* (1930) and *Venichar Saud* which are Assamese versions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Merchant of Venice*. There have been a number of children's journals too the first among them being *Lara Bandhu* which was edited by Karunabhiram Barua. *Akan* (1915), *Maina* (1923), *Pakhila* (1933) are other children's journals. A lot of renowned authors have tried their hand at children's literature and these include among others Nabakanta Barua, Nirmalprabha Bordoloi, Lila Gogoi. Prominent

contributors to children's literature are Premadhar Dutta and Anata Deva Sharma and their premature death has meant a big loss for Assamese children's literature. The biggest contributor to children's literature in Assamese till date probably remains Bhabendranath Saikia whose works like Xantaxistha, Hrishthapushtha, Mahadushta; Morom, Moromor Deuta remain in the mind and heart of every Assamese child.

Malayalam Children's Literature

Children's literature in Malayalam gained momentum only after independence but preindependence there were also some developments. It can be said that when the committee for compiling of text books began in 1867 then the production of children's literature in Malayalam started. Raja Verma became the president of the Text Book Committee in 1881 and he brought about distinct changes in children's books production. With an intention to instill moral values, he encouraged others to write too for children. Matthew M. Kuzhiveli can be conferred the status of writing deliberately and consciously for children. He not only translated famous English books for children into Malayalam but was also the first person to bring out an encyclopedia in Malayalam addressed to children. But unlike Bengal, the literary output was mainly pedantic in nature. It gradually progressed some decades later and resulted in the publication of a series of fairy and folk tales and classics, both of the East and West. Despite the state progressing much in literacy, children's literature still remains only a poor relation and oral narratives remain the main source of literature. But the ray of hope is held out by the large number of children's magazines published every year. Chanda-ama, Thaliru, Balarama are a few of the well known names.

Marathi Children's Literature

Children's literature in Marathi can be said to have started with the publication of the magazine Balbodha by Vinayak Kondadev Oak in 1881. Vasudev Govind Apte started a new children's magazine Ananda in 1906 which remained very popular with children. Following Ananda's example there were other works also. Apte was also instrumental in the overall development of Marathi children's literature and thus he wrote a large number of children's books which include abridged and simplified versions of great Indian classics, a collection of fantasies named Chittaranjan (1949) and a book on nature titled Kawa Kase? He can indeed be called the father of Marathi children's literature. P. K. Atre was

another name to reckon with in Marathi children's literature. Atre's main aim was to instill in children a love for learning and literature and he was quite successful in doing so. His Navayuga Vachanmala textbooks were given a long run in majority of schools in Maharashtra. A. S. Sane writing under the name Sane Guruji was very much influential in imbibing in the children the nationalistic fervour and patriotism that was the call of the day then. The publishing houses like Mouji Prakashan and Popular Book Depot brought out many important children's books. Another important aspect of Marathi children's literature is the development and rapid progress of children's theatre. Renowned figures like Vijay Tendulkar and C. T. Kanolkar have produced many plays for children and this phenomenon reflects on the well-developed tastes of children for theatre in this region. It is also reflective of newer options in children's literature (Sheoran 131).

Hindi Children's Literature

Though Hindi is the national language, yet children's literature is yet to make much progress. Interestingly, modern Hindi literature and children's literature developed almost simultaneously. Bal Bodhini was the first children's magazine which began publishing in 1874. In Hindi, more than any other language, poetry flourished better than prose so far as children's literature is concerned. Bharatendu Harish Chander was one of the fathers of children's literature in Hindi. Maithili Sharan Gupta, Ram Naresh Tripathi, Sohan Lal Dwivedi were some of the known figures of Hindi children's literature. After independence, children's writings gained momentum and many adult writers started to work on it seriously. While traditional Sanskrit classics still formed a large portion of the array of children's literature, translation of "World's Classics" were also taken up. Adaptation also paved the way for children's literature and many classics were so adapted as to suit the child reader. Hindi children's literature developed on well-planned lines and as such there was a large stock of literature on varied subjects. The National Book Trust, National Publishing House, Children's Book Trust, Atma Ram and Sons, Rajpal and Sons, and Arya Book Depot are well-known publishing houses for children's literature in Hindi. Children's magazines like Parag and Nandan are also very popular. But at the same time, the output remains limited and largely didactic in nature. Scant interest is shown in developing the various genres and publishing houses are also reluctant to take up challenging topics. Despite this, Hindi children's literature

occupies a better standing than its regional counterparts. A few of the popular authors include AnandPrakash Jain, Jai PrakashBharti, Vishnu Prabhakar, Yog Raj Thani, and VedMitra (Sheoran 133-134).

Indian English Children's Literature

The pervasive problem with Indian children's literature is that mythology and folktales have satisfied the need without any original children's literature being produced. Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan specifically says that, other than the Panchatantra "imaginative literature intended specifically for children is not part of Indian literary tradition" (101). In fact, Ramayana, Mahabharata, Panchatantra, Hitopadesha, Jataka Tales continue to flourish in the Indian market and as NavinMenon says, any visit to bookstalls in India will give proof that these works and their retellings have become the staple fare of the day (29). The problem with Indian English children's literature stems from two facts. The first is of course the easy availability of western children's literature, which in a way not only suffices but also kills the necessity of producing indigenous Indian English children's literature. The second and more important fact is the question of language. This question will be discussed presently but it is necessary to add here that language functions as one of the important means through which the development and probably the stunted growth too of Indian English children's fiction can be traced.

The pre-independence period is an initializing period so far as the present position of Indian English children's fiction is concerned. But if we look at it from the concept of positioning the child within the locus of children's literature in India, especially from the perspective of the colonizer and the colonized, then we find that the notion of the child performing the nation is set within the literature produced during this period. It is imperative to go through the arguments put forward by SupriyaGoswami in *Colonial India in Children's Literature* (2012) to vouch for these facts. Goswami argues that "British, Anglo-Indian, and Bengali children's literature of empire celebrate children and their ability to become transformative agents of change" (4). She also argues that the children in British and Anglo-Indian literature act as agents that corroborate the Empire's power in India. Conversely, Goswami argues, Bengali children's literature situates the children as performing agencies of change who can effectively subvert the colonizing process (4). Goswami looks at a number of children's texts written during the period like Mary Martha Sherwood's *The History of Little*

Henry and his Bearer (1814), BarbaraHofland's *The Captives in India: A Tale* (1834), Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Books* (1894 and 1895), Sara Duncan's *The Story of Sonny Sahib* (1894) and finds that these texts in fact locate the British or Anglo-Indian child within the early conflicts of the British Empire with India. These texts see the colonial enterprise as one which is at constant threat from the Indian natives and the child is placed within the discourse of colonial liberating mission of the native (9). The first children's writer in English in India was DhanGopalMukherji. His books include *Kari the Elephant* (1922), *Jungle, Beasts and Man* (1923), *Hari, the Jungle Lad* (1924) and *Ghond the Hunter* (1928) displaying the intricate knowledge of wildlife in India (Srinivasan 33).

If pre-independence English language children's literature saw the Empire as an uneasy place of existence constantly at threat from the native, the post-independence scenario tried to subvert that very fact with the prime motive of instilling in the child pride and love for the nation. The Indian child formed a perfect vehicle for the instilling of Indian nationalism, the promise that Nehru envisaged in the nation could only be realized through the child. The ideology of the fledgling nation can best be represented through the fledglings of the society that is the children. But at the same time, the nationalistic leanings cannot be realized through borrowed literature. The problem of children's literature is therefore well encapsulated in the following statement:

There was not enough indigenous literature for children in India apart from the epics and folklore and myths and legends. They were brought up on Western writings. . . . As a result these children were conversant with Western life styles than with the way of life of children in other parts of their own country. (Shankar 260)

This statement in a sense encompasses the whole concept of building up an effective genre of children's writings in India which was to a large extent conceptualized through Shankar Pillai's efforts. The publishing scenario received a boost through Shankar's sustained initiatives but it is imperative to explain how English children's literature can be contextualized. Meena Khorana in her detailed analysis of the publishing sector in post-independence India says that at that time there were no publishing houses for children's books. The immediate period after independence focused more on the production of text books rather than children's books and therefore in 1961 The National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) was established to publish good

and appropriate text books for children (Khorana, Life 94). The irony of children's literature in India lies in this very fact that the nationalistic concerns emphasized more on textbooks production rather than children's literature per se and the situation prevails even today. Khorana further says that till a proper publishing industry was set up, English children's writers restricted themselves to children's sections of some leading English language newspapers. But in spite of the overt nationalistic ideals in relation to children's literature, it was English language publishing that developed earliest (Life 95). The Children's Book Trust (CBT) was set up in 1957 by Shankar Pillai and it was exclusively meant for children's books publishing. Most of the books brought out by CBT were in English and later on they were translated into some of the major Indian languages. The books were kept low priced to cover a large audience and were made available keeping in mind the diversity of children's age groups. CBT's endeavours are noteworthy because it continuously strived to upgrade itself and therefore encouraged new writings and writing skills. It is through CBT's initiative that Arup Dutta's *The Kaziranga Trail* came to be published in 1979 and which, in a way, set a benchmark for others to follow (Jafa 799). With the initiative from the then Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, The National Book Trust (NBT) was set up in 1957 and started publishing books specifically for children from 1969. The NBT aimed at publishing low-priced books promoting national integration. Thereby translations of regional books were also promoted. In order to promote literary works of Indian authors in their own languages the "Nehru BalPustakalaya" and "AadanPradan" series were started in 1985. NBT has done laudable work in publishing translated works, information books, text books and taking up new projects for the development of children's literature (Srinivasan 36-37). The Association of Writers and Illustrators for Children (AWIC), founded in 1981, is a registered voluntary organization representing writers and illustrators for children's books based in Delhi has its members bringing in professionalism hitherto unseen. It also publishes a quarterly magazine called *Writers and Illustrators*, bringing out research-oriented articles and reports of various seminars and conventions on children's literature. It was only in the late 1970s that Indian English Children's literature started flourishing. India Book House started off with the 'Echo' and the 'Cheetah' series and also the very popular *Amar Chitra Katha* was launched to cater to the comic reading audience. As the need for the retold series began waning and the English reading

generation started craving for something original, newer and newer publishing houses joined the fray. Many names like Vikas, Roli Books International, Thomson Press started publishing in the late 1970s and later on other established publishing houses like Puffin, Rupa, and Harper Collins have also started bringing out original works by Indian authors. Again, renowned publishers like Macmillan, Orient Longman and Oxford University Press have brought Indian editions of foreign publications. Along with them, there are also indigenous publishing houses like *Katha* and *Tara* are doing a lot of creative work in this area (Srinivasan 42- 44).

The Issue of the English Language with respect to Children's Literature

Is English only a language in India or are there other issues attached to it? This is the question that needs to be answered before we engage in an analysis of Indian English children's literature. More so, India being home to a large number of languages, why is it that this language receives so much attention, be it positive or negative? India has a long history of invasion and from time to time various rulers have brought and assimilated a variety of languages into Indian culture. English is, in this sense, the last language to come to India. The place of the erstwhile official language during Muslim rule in India, Persian, was taken over by English in 1837 but Hindi was also used in some forms of official communication (Das Gupta 43). There have been various arguments put forward at different periods of time which have tried to formulate a distinct division in the history of the English language in India. These divisions nonetheless accept that the two major sections in the development of the English language in India are the ones before and after independence. The pre-independence period has to trace its origins to the initial encounter between the English and India when trade and commerce first opened up communication between the two nations. The gradual increased importance that English started gaining in India can be assigned to the Charter Act of 1813. Gauri Vishwanathan says that the act paved the way for the missionaries to engage themselves in working more zealously as it revoked the strict restrictions on missionary activities in India. At the same time, it also reposed a lot of responsibility on the East India Company to take up the initiative of educating the natives. The English language thus came to be established through the necessity of imbibing the natives with an idea of English language, culture and, especially, religion and thus texts like Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Bacon's

Novum Organon, and Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress became potent tools in the process (43). The Wood's Despatch, Macaulay's minute, and Bentick's education policy paved the way for the establishment of the English language in India and Indians too, especially educated Bengalis, were interested in receiving English language education.

It is the post-independence period that saw the actual hold of the English language over India. The language controversy was raging in India for a long time, and after independence the national leaders conceived of Hindi as the official language of India hoping that the language would forge communication across various communities and also give rise to national integration. The knowledge that one language policy is difficult to implement in India made the leaders adopt a time-frame during which Hindi will gradually take over English in all respects. But this vision never saw the light of the day and therefore English and Hindi still continue their status as official languages. Jason Baldrige in "Reconciling Linguistic Diversity: The History and the Future of Language Policy in India" says that the supporters of Hindi did not foresee the problems that can arise in implementing one language and thus the outcry, especially in the south, that arose after the attempt in 1965 to make the linguistic change over from English to Hindi. Before Hindi could replace English as the sole official language of the union, cries of "Hindi never, English ever!" rang out loud and violently in the city of Madras (now Chennai), finally leading to the present status quo (Das Gupta 237). English and Hindi both continue to be the official languages of India. The educational scenario is ambiguous too in this respect since Hindi becomes an optional subject after a certain standard, while English remains as a compulsory subject even up to undergraduate level.

The idea of a language that caters to a large public is also complacent in itself, looking at the reality of India. English as a language is accessible to a very small adult population and to a yet smaller child population. The irony of the situation seems obvious enough—a supposedly link language for a literature meant for all children remains a very elitist one. The "English medium" education that creates a group of children who could read and understand the language remains available only to the upper and middle classes of the society. The ghost of Macaulay's minute still haunts the Indian educational system. More than encouraging these children towards a literature which reflects their own culture, the English education actually creates a cocoon where children are happy in the world created by the likes of Enid

Blyton, Roald Dahl or E. Nesbit. Authors and publishers who choose to produce children's literature in English know very well that their consumer reach is miniscule compared to the whole reading population of India. While there are claims that this literature has started growing or reaching out to the masses, yet the reality remains that the popularity (if there is any) of Indian English children's literature is mainly an off-shoot of Indian English literature. The debate regarding the use of English in Indian literature continues even today with both sides putting forward their own views. But it assumes an even greater importance in the context of children's literature, which was originally meant to foster nationalism. Considering the content of much of this literature, it remains cultural constructs of a nation divided between its urban elite and rural poor. The idea of nation-building thereby seems out of context since the literature, instead of creating a world of mutual inclusiveness, actually leads to larger social exclusion. The use of the language thus remains problematic considering its long lasting influence on the mind of the child.

How does English as a language then come into play with regard to children's literature? At the same time, is the perpetuation of nationalism the prerogative of language only? If yes, then does children's literature in English remain an anachronism? Would it then be wrong to assume that Indian English children's literature is after all an elitist ideal and children who can understand English language should be satisfied with western imports only? The answers to these questions lie more often than not in the answers given by Indian English literature to corroborate its stand as an Indian literature in itself. One of the major defenses of Indian English usage is what Bill Ashcroft et al term in *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) as the appropriation of a colonial language for the purpose of decolonization (38). For a long time, Indian English literature has been abused for being urban centred in its focus and elitist in its reach. At the same time, there was hardly any critical acclaim for this literature and though pioneers like R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao wrote prolifically there was not much market for this literature either in India or abroad. Things seemed to take a dramatic turn with the advent of Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. Anita Desai makes an apt remark in this regard in "From the Cave to the Bazaar":

The picture changed abruptly, dramatically, in 1981, when a book called *Midnight's Children* appeared on the scene like a thunderbolt and the author was sent to India on that

until then unknown exercise, a book-tour. It was the combination of a book that proved that Indian English was a language in itself, capable of presenting serious important ideas with vigour and vitality (G.V. Desai had done the same in *All About H. Hatterr* but it had been a flash in the pan and led nowhere) and of the author as a personality, that changed the Indian scene overnight. Not only was a whole generation of young writers like Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth and Upamanyu Chatterjee energized and given confidence by the success of Salman Rushdie's book, its language and ideas, but all the discouraged defeated publishers sat up and took notice of them. And the combination of these two phenomena—a new generation of Indian writers, addressing Indian subjects and items in a language taken from Indian streets newspapers, journals, and films, and a class of enterprising business who decided they were worth publishing—marked the '80s and '90s.(7).

II. CONCLUSION

The sudden spurt in the writing also threw up many issues that had not previously been thought of or were not considered to be topics to be treated in literature. Rushdie is remarkable in the context of children's literature, too, for he ventured into it with issues hitherto not treated properly in this literature. His work brings in a sophistication and finesse that was previously unknown in Indian English children's literature.

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