

Review Article

Children's Literature in India: Evolution, Themes, and Contemporary Challenges

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ABSTRACT



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The works of children literature in India have traditionally been both a form of imaginative space of narration and a means of passing the culture. It is based on oral traditions like the Panchatantra and the Jataka Tales but has developed in response to colonial experiences, nation-building in post-independent times and the emergence of mass publishing. The literature written by Indian children in the modern period is witness to the fine diversity of themes including fantasy and folklore to burning social issues of gender, caste, class, and mental health. The introduction of digital media, e-books, and interactive media has not only changed the way, but also broadened access to stories, but has also brought concerns of creativity, attention and inclusivity. The paper discusses the historical process, thematic richness, psychological effects and pedagogical importance of children literature in India. It stresses the dual aspect of texts to children as sources of entertainment and education, which may build empathy, resilience and critical thinking. Simultaneously, it outlines the obstacles, including commercialisation, cultural bias, and the threat of anxiety due to some of the narratives. It is the case that Indian children literature is going to be in balancing imagination and social responsibility whereby stories are not exclusive and age-wise meaningful both in print and online formats.

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Introduction

Childhood is known as an important stage of development in the life of a human being, which is emotionally, cognitively, and morally evolving. In influencing these aspects, children literature is a very important aspect in giving young readers stories that amuse, teach and give moral lessons. As Hunt (1994) says, children literature definition is so clichéd that we have consumed oceans of ink on this subject that is the variety of the genre and the multiple impacts it makes upon the minds of the children. Children literature is not just an object of amusement but the means of passing cultural norms, social principles, and moral reasoning, with children being able to acquire the skills of empathy, critical thinking, and emotional stability (Nikolajeva, M. 2015)

The children literature in India has been changing drastically over the years due to the transformations in the social set up, the cultural awareness as well as education priorities. Pre-independent texts, such as oral traditions, mythologies, and folktales, like the Panchatantra or Jataka Tales, were more oriented towards morals, practical education, and a mixture of entertainment and morality (Gupta, D., 2024). Children literature during the colonial period had also become a tool of encouraging the Victorian values and Christian morals and loyalty to the British Empire at the expense of indigenous knowledge and cultural story telling (Ashcroft, 2013).

After the independence of India, children literature also developed to recover cultural identity and create national consciousness. Children's Book Trust (CBT) and Amar Chitra Katha started out by Anant Pai as the first institutions to offer children access to stories based on Indian history, mythology and heritage (Pai, 1999). Modern Indian writers such as Sudha Murty, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Kamla Bhasin, Kancha Ilaiah, and Niveditha Subramaniam have gone further to broaden the themes of children literature, such as gender equality, caste and class, social justice, the environment, identity and mental health (Murty, 2016; Bhasin, 2019). They represent a growing understanding of children as active agents in the society and show the possibility of using literature as a tool which can be used to develop empathy, social awareness and critical thinking at a young age.

It is especially important to mention that the psychological aspect of modern children literature is one of the most prominent since the stories about mental health, traumas, or social inequality can contribute to the process of working with complex emotions and teaching children how to cope with them. The examples of such works as Sanjana Kapur *Who Stole Bhैया Smile?* (2019) and Ritu Vaishnav *Inside a Dark Box* (2020) demonstrate the possibilities of using the story to cultivate emotional intelligence and discuss the problematic situations delicately. Simultaneously, the literature is too dark or

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too old, which may cause anxiety or misunderstanding and it is also necessary to pay close attention to the curation and storytelling that is age-appropriate

This paper aims at investigating the development, theme, and issues of the Indian children literature in the light of its cultural, social, and psychological aspects. Through the comparison of classical and modern literature, and the study of the publishing patterns, this research paper will show how the Indian children literature is a balance between heritage, social awareness and entertainment. It also questions the idea that the current stories offer secure and enriching environments to children and encourage their emotional maturity, critical thinking, and strength. In the end, this study underlines the need to have balanced, culturally sensitive and psychologically informed literature capable of fostering the young minds in a fast changing digitally connected world.

Review of Literature

Literature in children in India has been historically used as a means of moral, educational and emotional growth. According to Hunt (1994), children literature is not simply a form of entertainment but a pedagogical tool, which is subtle and influences values, empathy and moral reasoning. Nikolajeva, M. (2015). also emphasizes its psychological effects because narratives have to be well-constructed, and kids can overcome their fears, cope with complicated feelings, and become resilient when the topics are introduced in accordance with the developmental level.

The development of the Indian children literature bears a rich complex of cultural, historical and ideological aspects. Early methods of moral and practical education were passed on through oral forms such as the Panchatantra and Jataka Tales, which were a basis of entertainment mixed with morality (Rani, 2025). These readings are still used in modern day storytelling to promote imagination, critical thinking and cultural literacy (Sutar, 2019). According to Post-colonial scholarship, children literature played a significant role in educating the moral values of the Victorians, Christian morals and loyalty to the empire during the colonial reign in Britain, at the expense of native knowledge and culture (Ashcroft, 2013). The reclaiming and reconstruction of culturally based narratives in children literature has been actively pursued by post-independent Indian writers and institutions as a way of reclaiming this literature. Other projects such as the Children Book Trust (CBT) and Amar Chitra Katha, which were started by Anant Pai were encouraging tales about India mythology, history and culture (Pai, 1999). Sudha Murty, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, and Kamala Bhasin are among the authors who have broadened their writing on children literature to contemporary social concerns, including gender equality, identity, empowerment, and moral development (Murty, 2004; Bhasin, 2019). In her collections such as *How I Taught My Grandmother to Read*, Murty dwells upon the purpose of perseverance, education, and social responsibility and highlights the values that are crucial in the environment of the contemporary Indian society. In the same way, *The Conch Bearer* by Divakaruni is the story built around mythological narrative and adventure yet a hidden agenda on moral uprightness and environmental awareness.

The works of contemporary children literature are growingly interested in contemporary social problems, including caste, class, gender and mental health. The book *Tilling the Land* by Kancha Ilaiah touches upon the theme of caste hierarchy and labor hierarchy and encourages social consciousness among youth (Ilaiah, 2007). *Mayil Will Not Be Quiet* (2011) by Subramaniam and *Girls Want Azadi* (2019) by Bhasin better the future by predicting gender equity, urging girls to rebel against the established order and establish their independence. Mental health issues are also introduced to the Indian literature with

such works like *Who Stole Bhैया Smile?* (2019) by Sanjana Kapur and *Inside a Dark Box* (2020) by Ritu Vaishnav that enables children to learn about depression, anxiety, and emotional strength. The readings illustrate the shift of the approach of the prescriptive moral storytelling to the literature that enables children to justify their experience and foster emotional intelligence.

Digitalisation has provided a new layer to child reading in which children can now have interactive, immersive and personalized reading of e-books, audiobooks and AI-supported story telling platforms. This can offer unprecedented access and participation, but scholars warn that overuse of digital media can diminish the power to explore the imagination, attention span and social interaction. Therefore, the balanced mix of the print and digital medium is paramount in the formation of literacy, creativity and emotional growth. The sensibility of inclusiveness, diversity and culturally sensitive narratives is an aspect that has been propelled by Indian scholars. According to Roop Kanwal (2024), to transform children into responsible citizens, empathy, social justice, and environmentalism could be instilled with the help of new literature. Khorana, (1991). also criticizes the prevalence of commercially oriented entertainment-driven narratives which tend to push other contextually important social matters to the background and blends the necessity of socially conscious storytelling that is both engaging and informative. In short, the current literature demonstrates that the literature of Indian children can be taken as a developing area which incorporates traditional cultural narratives and the modern social and psychological issues. Such authors as Sudha Murty, Kamla Bhasin, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Kancha Ilaiah and Niveditha Subramaniam are such examples as they focus on creating culturally oriented, socially aware and emotional works. According to the review, to achieve its pedagogic and developmental potential, Indian children literature should remain inclusive in terms of age.

Methodology

The research took a qualitative approach in exploring the development, theme and psychological effects of the literature about Indian children. The choice of traditional and modern texts, was done on the basis of the quality of literature, cultural appropriateness, and instructional usefulness. The paper also took into account the impact of the digital media on reading among children. The approach enabled a combined approach on the quality of literature, inclusivity and psychological safety in the literature written by Indian children.

Children Literature in India Its Development.

Indian children literature has passed through several phases starting with oral literature up to the colonial education impact and more so, the emergence of postcolonial and digital stories. Storytelling to children in its early forms was oral in nature, and was expressed in the form of fables, myths and folklore. Body of work like the Panchatantra and the Jataka tales, in addition to being entertaining, taught moral lessons and wisdom in practical matters, instilling cultural and ethical standards in children since youth (Sharma, 2015). Being heavily embedded in Indian tradition, these tales focused on such virtues as resilience, honesty, and empathy and formed the moral imagination of young listeners.

Children literature assumed new aspects during the colonial era where missionaries and British administrators brought in texts of didactic and moralistic character to reinforce colonial education. These tales tended to be Christian moral paradigms and Western cultural allusions, which, although they enlarged the children reading field also supplanted the native ones (Ramaswamy, 2015). However, this was also the time when the print culture and publishing among children in India started.

The literature of indigenous children resumed its momentum in the post-independence era. The role of publishers and the emergence of illustrated series like Amar Chitra Katha, the Children's Book Trust (CBT), and other publishers in promoting the revival of cultural identity by retelling the mythology, history, and folklore was central (Menon, S. 2024). These papers aimed at inculcating a sense of national pride, cultural consciousness and education and making reading more accessible both in urban and rural India. Now days the literature of Indian children is diversified to a great extent. It now contains themes that deal with the social issues like caste, gender, disability and mental health. Such books as *Guthli Has Wings* by Kanak Sashi and *Jamlo Walks* by Samina Mishra are examples of this change, as they are narratives that make children think about the burning social issues. At the same time, due to globalisation and online services, new possibilities and threats have also appeared, pushing boundaries and raising concerns regarding commercialisation and cultural erosion. Accordingly, the history of children literature in India is a process that indicates a compromise of tradition and modernity, entertainment and pedagogy, cultural identity and global influences. This historical summary highlights the immense influence the genre has on the imagination of children as well as changes in the society on a bigger scale.

Topical Preoccupations of Modern Children Literature.

The modern children literature in India has gone well beyond the folklore and moral tales to include social, psychological and cultural aspects. Although classic tales were more of a lesson in values based on the stories of the young and simple deeds, the contemporary literature displays the intricacies of the real life of children and is indulging in intriguing and intricate issues. Among the most prominent trends, the growing focus on the emotional state and mental health should be listed. Books such as *Vaishnav* (2020) book *Inside a Dark Box* enable the reader to empathize with their experience of depression by using little text and illustrations, which allows young readers to identify and express their feelings. Mental health is a visible and approachable subject in literature as such texts offer the children a safe space to address psychological challenges and develop resilience.

The other relevant theme issue is the depiction of the family affairs, loss, and perseverance. Singh (2019) in *Darkless* talks about the emotional experience of a child, who has to deal with the disease of his mother, and emphasizes courage, empathy, and unconditional love. By tackling the cases of loss, depression, or misfortune, the modern literature provides the children with the techniques of interpreting the unpleasant feelings and helps to develop the coping strategies, which are beneficial to the emotional development. These stories illustrate that literature can be an important source of enabling the young readers to work through the real-life challenges.

The contemporary children literature has also focused on identity and social justice. Gender identification, caste, and class, as well as social inequalities are discussed in such texts as Sashi, *Guthli Has Wings* (2019), and Mishra, *Jamlo Walks* (2020). The works break the stereotypes of society and provide children with a chance to work on the questions of fairness, equality, and inclusiveness. Through the depiction of other voices, this kind of literature promotes sympathy and social awareness and a child will have an idea of the wider social world in which they inhabit (Khorana, 1991).

Meanwhile, fantasy and adventure are also most popular. Such books like Aru Shah and the End of Time by Chokshi (2018) and *The Conch Bearer* by Divakaruni (2003) help the readers to get into the worlds of the fantasy world with heroic missions and their magical difficulties. Although these stories

are thought-provoking and imaginative, they tend to focus on a commercial appeal rather than children being exposed to social realities that they need to address, and this is the tension between entertainment and educative or moral intent in children literature. The digital revolution has brought new ways of storytelling, and this has altered the manner in which children consume literature. Though these technologies enhance creativity and accessibility, they have other disadvantages like overstimulation, low attention and lack of time to read in a reflective manner. A balance between the traditional print literature and the digital advances is thus necessary to instill the imagination as well as the profound cognitive activity. To sum up, the modern Indian children literature is marked by a highly complex set of themes, including emotional well-being and social justice, fantasy and digital interactivity. Covering all these aspects, literature is not only a source of entertainment but also of empathy, strength and a sense of morality, as young readers can find out how to address personal and social issues with insight and innovation.

Digital Revolution in the Literature of Children.

The digitalisation of children literature has reinvented how children readers engage with their narratives and this has broadened access, creativity and interest. Children can now be exposed to literature not on the traditional printed page but through e-books, audiobooks, interactive applications, and web-based platforms. It has also democratised story-telling by allowing the authors to share the stories directly with the global audience in real-time and inspiring children to engage in the process of narratives co-creation.

Interactive, like those by Herve Tullet, *Press Here*, encourage children to touch and feel the text, either by tapping, shaking, or pushing the pages, and this type of playful, hands-on interaction resembles the digital model of interactivity. On the same note, augmented and virtual reality, such as *Bookful* and *Wonderscope*, enable animated characters to be displayed in real-life environments and combines physical and digital narration. Technology works with narratives are also present in such works as *See You Someday Soon* by Pat Zietlow Miller (2021), where the author uses video calls and mobile devices to develop themes of connection, separation, and emotional resilience in such challenging circumstances as the pandemic lockdown. Artificial intelligence on such platforms as *Storybird* also allows children to customise stories using their names and preferences, making them more interesting and stimulating creativity.

Although these benefits exist, digitalisation has some dangers. Overstimulation and computerized applications may cause short attention span, inhibit imaginative exploration, and social isolation. The experience of concentration, empathy and having time to think of a physical book which cannot be developed in digital forms can be captured in its tactile, immersive experience. Thus, it is essential to maintain the proper combination of traditional print literature and digital media to ensure proper development of cognitive, emotional, and social lives of children so that digital innovation should complement the principles of reading rather than displace the traditional reading experiences.

Difficulties with Modern Children Literature.

Although literature about children in India has largely grown and had diversified, there still are a number of challenges that stand in the way towards children literature being able to educate, entertain and nurture the minds of the young people in a comprehensive manner. Among the problems, one can identify the growing commercialisation of the genre. Most of the modern books do not focus on seriousness but on entertainment, movement and humour in place of seriousness on societal issues. Popular series like Aru Shah and the End of

Time (2018) by Chokshi or *The Conch Bearer* (2003) by Divakaruni are based on heroic quests and magical adventures which though they are stimulating imagination do not address social issues of inequality, poverty, or disability in the real world. The dominance of escapist stories is supported by the market forces, which do not allow children to read literature that would promote empathy, critical thinking, or social awareness.

The other difficulty is the delicate approach to working with dark or troubling subjects. Although the topic of danger, fear, and resilience in children literature has been traditionally implemented with a lesson, modern literature may contain horror, trauma, and social injustice, which can disturb young readers when they are not yet age-wise ready. Examples of books that give morbid or frightening scenarios, which, unless put into proper context, would cause anxiety or confusion, include *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark* (1981) by Schwartz or *The Gashlycrumb Tinies* (1963) by Gorey. Literature can be used to assist children to overcome fear and the unknown, but such stories have to be well created by keeping in mind the developmental stages and emotional vulnerability. Otherwise, the moral or educational message intended can be lost in misery or confusion.

Digitalisation is not only offering opportunities to literature in children, but also challenges. The e-books, audiobooks and interactive sources like Storybird give a wider reach and provide the ability to create new forms of storytelling, yet it has also brought overstimulation and shortened attention spans. Besides, the tangible and experiential reading of a hardcopy book which is essential in establishing imagination and reflective reasoning can be lost in digital formats. Overdependence on the digital media is a danger to social seclusion, decreased exploration of the creative and the substitution of imaginative engagement with simple, gamified communications.

Lastly, the problem of representation is one that is still a major problem. Though modern literature has started to tackle the issues of caste, gender and class these are still limited and simplified. Complicated social problems may be turned into stereotypes instead of being eliminated. Publishers and authors need to be culturally sensitive, diversified, and engage the story in a way that children get to read diverse and socially conscious viewpoints that depict the diversity of the current Indian society (Ilaiah, 2019). In short, although the modern children literature in India has achieved a significant progress in touching emotional, social, and educational issues, it still has to overcome the specific challenges. There are commercial pressures, poor treatment of dark subject matter, the impact of the digital media and the failure to fully capture social realities that jeopardize its development and education potential. It is important to tackle such issues in order to make literature an effective instrument of moral, emotional, and cognitive development of young readers.

Psychology and Education Effect of Children Literature.

The literature that is being published on children is very important in influencing the young minds not just in terms of entertainment, but also in terms of psychological, social and moral growth. Exposure to stories solving the problems of mental health, social injustice, and ethical problems will enable children to grow their empathy, resilience, and problem-solving skills. As an illustration, children can identify and name emotional challenges such as childhood depression and make sense of complicated emotional states through the books such as *Who Stole Bhaiya?* by Kapur (2019) in a safe environment to feel secure to talk about the emotional challenges. In the same way, narratives that discuss caste, gender, and social justice, like *The Why-Why Girl* by Devi and *Tilling the Land* by Ilaiah (2019) can help people think critically and understand the existing societal structure at a tender age.

Educationally, children literature improves the cognitive and language ability in children and encourages the culture literacy at the same time. Classical sources such as the Panchatantra and Jataka Tales are constructing moral thinking, narrative abilities, and the culture of the people, whereas modern sources are basing on the same foundations by facilitating modern issues, such as environmental awareness, inclusivity, and emotional intelligence (Kanwal, 2024). Choosing the right age-related content is of the essence since literature that is either too dark, complex, or commercially-driven can be unintentionally used to cause anxiety or confusion. Well-developed narratives may turn complicated stories into learning chances, as children will be able to experience fears and ethical issues in a safe and symbolic setting.

The use of the digital media reduces the psychological and educational impact even more. The process of reading can be made interactive, personalised and stimulate creative expression and participatory learning by the means of interactive e-books, augmented reality stories, and AI-assisted platforms. Nonetheless, the excessive use of digital media can also cause social alienation, hyperstimulation, and lack of imagination. Hence, a moderate middle ground incorporating both the conventional print literature and the consideration of digital accountability in the storytelling is necessary to maximize the learning and emotional growth of young readers.

Conclusion

The development of children literature in India has been modifying in which the ancient oral and moral fables have been transformed to a broad range and the dynamic quality of the literature which addresses the social, psychological and cultural questions. The recent literature offers children the tools to address the complex emotions and social realities by unfolding the ideas of mental health, identity, gender equality, social justice and family resilience. In works like Vaishnav's *Inside a Dark Box* (2020) or Singh's *Darkless* (2019), it is demonstrated that literature can help foster empathy, emotional sensitivity, and coping mechanisms, and books based on the idea of caste, class, and gender inequality can have children think critically about social inequalities and social hierarchies. In the meantime, there are problems to be considered. The commercialisation of children literature generally is based on the entertainment rather than on the information of the educative and social relevance, and the dark and disturbing themes have to be established in the correct proportions so that the fear or anxiety does not emerge. Digitalisation offers opportunities of interactive storytelling, but it also presents a threat of reduced attention span and lower level of imaginative appeal that are provided through traditional books available on print. In addition, despite the growing proportion of different identities, they are not represented subtly and sensitively to culture, which can ensure that children have empathy and a universal perspective of the society. In any case it is a kind of transformative literature, the one which would build the Indian children up, giving them the power of creativity, power, ideas of right and wrong and social awareness. There should be a healthy mix up of tradition and modern, both amusement and informative reports, print and electronic media such that literature does not cause to miss out in the general growth of the young reader. With the help of children literature, a generation of empathetic, critical-conscious and prepared to face the challenges of the modern world can be formed with confidence and with a sense of compassion.

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