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Telling Tales: Story-books for children in Delhi

by

Arpita Mitra

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Ensuring lasting change for children
The present study was undertaken with the objective of mapping various issues related to the production of children’s story books published and circulated in the metropolis of Delhi: how sensitive the content of these books is to social issues; how representative they are of indigenous culture and values; how effective they are in fulfilling their function of both entertainment and education; and such similar concerns. However, in the course of the research, the work took a definite shape around the pivotal issue of the representation of Indian ‘composite culture’ (in terms of religion, caste, class, gender, region) in children’s story books in English published or circulated in the metropolis of Delhi during 2008-2009.

The final choice of the theme was not guided by any kind of assumption about what a storybook for children should be like. That is to say, the project does not seek to propose any ideal form of writing for children. It, rather, seeks to investigate the present scenario in publishing for children in India and interrogate some prevalent trends and their underlying assumptions. In this sense, it is rife with questions, rather than answers.

The question that arises next is: why this particular theme? There has generally been an all-pervading assumption that there is a dearth of original or contemporary stories written by Indian authors for children that would address the changing concerns of the changing times. Similarly, there is also this concern that a large body of indigenous stories is not adequately represented to a wider reading public across India, as these stories mostly circulate orally and are specific to various regions, thereby making it difficult for them to travel across linguistic and cultural borders.
Thirdly, we also need to ponder upon the purpose of telling a story for children. Story-telling is a unique part of human civilization: it gives wings to certain human faculties; stories embody the travails and tribulations of the human spirit, just as they sing its triumphs and glories. In this sense, they are very intimate to human existence: whether we are professional story-tellers or not, each one of us has many stories to tell; stories are not only means of communication, but also means of communion. Coming back to the question: what is the purpose of telling stories to children? The purpose here is multifarious: instruction, entertainment, creative development as well as the development of positive human emotions.

However, neither can one inculcate values by being didactic nor is a story bereft of any instructive quality likely to have an impact upon the mind. Therefore, after some meandering and rambling about in this very interesting world of children's literature, what struck me as a worthwhile venture was the pursuit of the above-mentioned theme, which would, at least, help us put into perspective the reality as it is, vis-à-vis some of the concerns that we share about children and childhood, and more specifically, about Indian childhood.

Before embarking on a discussion of the theme, it is desirable to pen down some of the methodological concerns involved in conducting such a work. The next few passages would address these issues. Section 2 of the Report would deal with a general outline of problems and prospects of children's literature in India from the above perspective. The third section would try to provide a close scrutiny of some storybooks, while the last section would attempt to draw some general conclusions.

I.

Self and the Work

This research work was taken up out of a ‘personal’ curiosity to know how ways of telling stories for children have changed over the past two decades, that is, from my childhood to the childhood of the young readers of this generation. A chance encounter with different ways of presenting the same old
story of Panchatantra by different publishers elicited questions about the nature of change in the field of children’s literature in India today.

A development that has caught the imagination of the research world in recent years for its methodological implications is the need to situate the researcher in his social milieu (cultural, economic etc.). The present study claims to be ‘subjective’ on all counts. That is, it would readily and unabashedly accept all accusations of skewed judgments caused by a particular subject-position, which is the outcome of years of 'baggage' accumulation. The only apology that can be offered for such an audacity is the fact that a theme that is so subjective to human beings as storybooks cannot be dealt with without a kind of 'personal' involvement. Secondly, which study that relates to man in society can after all claim to be totally objective? This, however, does not imply that the work does not follow any calling for an adherence to 'facts'. All it does is to add a caveat that the author's understanding and interpretation of the situation is highly informed by the special relationship that she shares with the subject of research undertaken, and also that her position is susceptible to refutation from a different vantage point.

Having grown up in Calcutta – a city with a vibrant culture of reading and a long-standing tradition of a separate body of literature in the regional language for children and adolescents – it was difficult for me, I must confess, to comprehend the reasons for the relative lack of children’s story books – rather the concept of children’s story book itself – in Delhi. Not that children in Delhi in today’s day and age do not read stories. It is, however, a different story that teachers in schools in Delhi these days recommend Chetan Bhagat and Arvind Adiga! Or perhaps my expectations were too high for me to understand and appreciate the constant endeavor that is being made to fill this lacuna.

Other methodological problems include what may be called the “adult syndrome”. Having virtually grown up reading Satyajit Ray's stories, I suddenly discover as an adult that almost all his stories lack women characters of any weight or significance. As a child, I merely needed to 'invent' a girl character for myself as Feluda's second cousin, who would pose a serious challenge to Topse's supposed intelligence. As an adult, I found this lacuna totally unacceptable. This indicates that our
reactions as children and as adults to the same thing vary, and therefore, to form an opinion about the desirability of certain elements in a story is highly informed by adult ways of looking at the world. For instance, ‘how can a child in today’s world find the ‘fantastic’ character of Hanuman interesting, even credible?’ is a question that adults pose, not children. Here goes another reason why it is difficult to be ‘objective’ while investigating this theme.

Furthermore, since this particular theme engages with awkward questions of identity formation (notions that are assimilated as well as those that are sought to be inculcated), it is a directly political theme, where questions of cultural prejudices cannot be elided. All these issues are to be borne in mind in order to avoid as far as possible conclusions that are too rigid and unequivocal.

Another issue that I would like to highlight at this point is about the kind of sources I have used. This is a study of select publishers only, as not too many of them publish the kind of books that are under scrutiny. Secondly, this work is primarily based on an analysis of texts, which is supported by interviews whenever possible. Therefore, in no way does this study claim to offer the last word on the subject. It is representative, rather than comprehensive; and it attempts to touch upon many issues of concern, hoping to leave many windows open for further inquiry.

II.

Indian stories for Indian children: problems and prospects

It is generally accepted that part of the problem lies in the fact that most people do not see the need for a separate body of literature for children. Just as some of us do not see the need for children’s films, for instance. It is often difficult for us, on account of being adults perhaps, to understand, appreciate and invest in children’s literature as an independent genre in itself.

The situation, however, is slightly different at the regional level. Certain pockets of India have an old and vibrant tradition of children’s literature in the regional language. According to some, there is nothing called 'national' literature, literature was born regional; and the richness of a language and
that of literature in that language are interrelated. It has been pointed out that the linguistic plurality of India makes the challenges of children's literature in this country unique.

In order to ensure uniform growth, some amount of exchange of literature between regions is essential. On the other hand, when it comes to the issue of such an exchange, the question that comes up is that of comprehensibility of other cultures in translation. There is a third dimension involved here. While talking of a metropolis like Delhi, where people have mostly come and settled from different parts of India, it becomes even more important to address the question of mother tongue and regional literature from the point of view of the child’s development.

India is a seat of stories and accounts for one-third of the world’s folklore. However, in spite of the number of folk tales, myths and legends that exist in India in both oral and written traditions, it has been generally difficult, because of various reasons, for modern publishers to tap this rich and traditional storehouse of stories. Apart from the flavor of cultural differences, another interesting aspect is the convergences and the divergences in the common inheritance of stories across regions. For the latter, the classic example is Ramayana and for the former, one has stories like Tenali Rama, Gopal Bhar and Birbal. But these are only the most well-known ones. There are many more which we do not get to know of easily. If this free-floating mass of stories could be brought to a wider readership, perhaps half the problem of circulating stale stories would be solved, with the added advantage that they would give a wholesome picture of our past society to our children.

Secondly, one also talks of a shortage of contemporary stories; from a study of about 4000 books by 200 publishers, the National Book Trust (NBT) found that a large number were folk tales, myths and legends.

An important point that came up in the course of my field work was that the majority of private publishers do not take any interest in regional literature, in stories written by Indian authors, or in contemporary stories. There are, however, a few exceptions whom we discuss in the following section.
III.

**Some Indian publishers with a difference**

Pratham Books mainly publish original, creative stories and stories with contemporary relevance. They publish in English and 11 Indian languages. All their books are priced between Rs. 10 and Rs. 25. Suzanne Singh, Trustee, Pratham says that Pratham Books was set up to create high quality low cost content in Indian languages for the thousands of children who were learning to read through programs done by Pratham. In 2006-07, they had an annual turnover was Rs.100,00,000 and they sell primarily to institutions who work with children and reading. They target families of all income brackets across India. They have linkages mainly with institutions like UNICEF, Room to Read, and various Governments.

Pratham Books have reached school-going children in over 70,000 government schools in Bihar. The Bihar government launched a program called “Bodhi Vriksha Karyakram” to improve the levels of reading in early grades. The government utilized 2 per cent of the funds given to them through Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan to buy books and resources for students of Standards 1 and 2. They invited a few publishers (including Pratham Books) to participate in *Pustak Melas* held in 37 districts of Bihar from 23 November 2008 to 7 January 2009. Schools were encouraged to come to these *melas* and buy books for the children of their school.

Suzanne says, “Our philosophy is to create Indian stories for Indian children and to this end we produce different kinds of books with different themes to suit all kinds of children.” Pratham Books has an editorial team that selects manuscripts on the basis of some guidelines that are already provided: “Our books qualify as learning enrichment and we do not necessarily promote any overt or covert moral messaging. We do, however, ensure that our books are non partisan and without any bias.” Akshara Foundation, which conducts large scale reading sessions with children, is their network partner.
What I found beautiful about *A Royal Procession* (Pratham) was the way historical fiction has been written for children. There is a “story” that takes place in another age (during the rule of Ashoka) with some facts about that age at the end of the story. The book is priced Rs. 25 and has a blurb. There is a personal touch about the profile of the author and the illustrator, for example, the following was written for author Subhadra Sen Gupta: “she has a weakness for good food”. Pratham books also carry a profile of a child, coming from underprivileged background, who would benefit out of the revenue from the sale of the book. This helps the child to relate to the people who are directly involved with the making of the book. What I found most striking, however, was that the story was entirely child-centric – the protagonists of the story are children and it revolves around their child-like interest in seeing the king and a child-like joy in being blessed personally by him.

In another story of the same series, *Raza meets the King* (Pratham), authored and illustrated by the same people, the protagonist is a child. In both the stories, children do something on their own – they achieve the coveted feat of pleasing kings. In both stories, children and their activities are very important, like Laxman and Parvati trying to help their father in pottery and bringing out weird shapes, Parvati painting the pots, Raza helping his father stitch clothes and making mistakes while cutting cloth and being concerned when the king is disappointed.

Another common point between the two stories is that both centre around two very important real-life non-Hindu kings – Ashoka (Buddhist) and Akbar (Mughal). Both centre around children and their meeting with the king – a fantasy that is likely to appeal to children. Personal details of the kings, like Akbar being very fussy about his clothes or his favorite color being white, add a charm to the historical personages. This book also contains historical facts (like cuisine etc.) about the age; has a blurb; and is priced Rs. 25.

Radhika Menon, the Managing Editor of Tulika Publishers, had once written, “[…] an education system in which the textbook is central, to the exclusion of almost any other kind of reading material is at the root of the problem. Combined with this, a certain cultural attitude to childhood which makes us see it as a stage in life that needs to be disciplined rather than nurtured, has shaped our understanding of what kind of books our children should read.” (*The Book Review*, 31(11), Children’s
Tulika was started in Chennai in February 1996 as a small independent organization to create quality books in English and other Indian languages. They work with government and nongovernment agencies to provide books for rural schools and libraries all over India. They also conduct workshops for teachers and schools on how to use bilingual and picture books. Tulika promotes its publications through a combination of library supply, supply to shops and to organizations working on reading promotion programs. Sandhya Rao, Senior Editor, is of the opinion that “Reading and stories empower children.”

Their target group constitutes families of all income brackets and they publish in as many languages as possible (at the moment English, Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam, Bangla, Gujarati, Marathi). They publish original and creative stories, particularly picture books in single and bilingual editions, covering both fiction and non-fiction. They also publish contemporary stories, and works of non-fiction on people, animals, history, and the way the world works. Sandhya says, “We are open to all forms of books, provided they have good content well presented, and will provoke readers into thinking beyond the page. Different children respond to different things, or different things interest different people, so there’s room for all. But quality and high standards have to be the benchmark.” She adds, “Being inclusive is our philosophy. We entertain only such writers and illustrators who are willing to keep these values in mind.”

Tulika promotes its publications through workshops and readings and interactions in schools and occasionally through book releases. Prices range from Rs. 40 – 250 and are determined competitively in consonance with quality. Sandhya thinks it is still the middle and upper middle classes which mostly buy story books and that the most preferred language for storybooks are the local language and English. Radhika had an important point to make about children’s books in English: “In the English language books published in India, we clearly see the influence of western books, in terms
of the creativity they exhibit, the attitudes they reflect and worldviews that are presented in them. And although many of them continue to be merely imitative, the best ones have a distinct cultural identity [...] The style and perspective authors of these books bring to their writing comes from a culturally unique ‘translated’ sensibility. Relating to an Indian language and its culture through English and vice versa brings an interconnectedness of the local and the universal in their stories. Therefore, to scoff at them as being western and rootless is, on the one hand, to dismiss a growing generation of children thinking and speaking in English [...], and, on the other, to ignore a large section of children aspiring to learn English as a language of empowerment.” (*The Book Review*, 31(11), Children’s Books Special, November 2007, p. 10).

Sandhya acknowledges a change in reading habits, albeit positively, “Yes, a very slow change can be seen. There is a definite demand for books of high quality, and also for books in regional Indian languages, apart from English. Plus a recognition of good quality picture books, with some discernment with regard to illustrations.” About the present choice of books available in the market, she adds, “The packaging generally (for all publishers) is better. Can’t say the same about content for all, or even design. There are more books available, and some good ones.”

In spite of the rise of other forms of entertainment for children, Sandhya feels that, “Books will continue to have to exist along with other more immediate forms of entertainment. Sales of our books are fairly steady.” But at the same time, she thinks, “Children not exposed to books and reading form the majority, and for them its films and TV any day. Not even sports so much. So storybooks are still lagging in the race. Having said this, I think more children are reading because there’s more available.” She adds, “Parents still need to be educated about the value of storybooks of a certain quality. They still seem to think children must only study study study and get good marks.”
According to her, “Schools play the most important role [in fostering reading habits], or at least they need to. However, many schools don’t even have libraries. Here, the government schools fare better. Public libraries hardly have anything worthwhile for children.”

About the future of story books, Sandhya feels, “Yes, the storybook will never die, not in India. There’s nothing that equals the pleasure of holding a book in the hand, feeling the pictures, turning the pages, and returning to favorite pictures or pages whenever one feels like. Little children are open-minded, they will read anything you give them. They also have so much more available these days, not all of it very good. So there is greater responsibility on publishers to create books of high quality in terms of both content and form. Since packaging has improved, it can give the impression of a ‘good’ book. This can be misleading.”

Tulika books, however, can perpetuate “the pleasure of holding a book in the hand, feeling the pictures, turning the pages”. *Brahma’s Butterfly* (Tulika) is all beautiful illustrations spreading across the page with a good-to-feel finish. The book has a blurb and is priced at Rs. 120. It deals with a simple mythical story – that of the origin of butterfly, of how Brahma was once angry with the humongous appetite of the caterpillar and cursed him and created the butterfly in order to relieve the stringency of the curse, when all the animals begged mercy, invoking his fatherly quality.

We come across another Brahma story in *The Monkey God and Other Hindu Tales* by Debjani Chatterjee (Rupa, 1993, reprint 2000, Rs. 50). ‘The Message of Thunder’ is a story about discontented *devas, manavas and asuras*, each discontented with their respective situations – the *devas* with too much opulence; the *manavas* with their selfishness and refusal to share their possessions with others in need; and the *asuras* with their relentless cruelty. All of them discovered one fine day that they are doing well living their own way, but they do not have peace of mind. So, they decided, independent of each other to go to father Prajapati and ask for peace of mind from him. Brahma, who was in a state of meditation was rattled by a huge crowd suddenly gathering in front of him and
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asking in unison for peace. The only sound he uttered to their earnest appeal was 'da' and nothing else after that. Left without any choice the three groups had to disperse, carrying with them their own understanding of the word da, by which, the gods understood damyata, that is self-control and moderation; the humans datta or to give; and the demons dayadhvam or mercy. Thus, each went home with the key to peace of mind. It is a different story though that they continued to forget it from time to time and be as unhappy as they were earlier.

Another book, Who will be Ningthou? (Tulika, Rs. 85) is very touching. Both the story and the presentation are very interesting and important. About the presentation first. The blurb says: “Manipur is a small state in northeastern India; Maitailon is a dialect spoken there. The Maitailon words in the story give readers a feel of the place and its people.” This book is part of the Wordbird Books series, which “features cross-lingual stories published simultaneously in English, Hindi, Malayalam, Kannada and Tamil. The stories, sourced from the rich oral traditions and folklore of India and other regions, emphasize the similarities and differences existing in this, our one world. Unfamiliar words and ideas are explained with the help of Wordbirds which streak across the pages and the child quickly acquires a multilingual vocabulary. Wordbirds nest in all the books in this series, ideal for 4 to 8 year-olds.”

When asked about the origin of the series, Sandhya says, “These are books through which we try to give a flavor of different cultures / ideas / languages to children. So the Wordbird acts as a sort of active and colorful glossary. It was born in Ekki Dokki as a sudden brainwave, and has served us well. Gives a sense of the whole (India, the world) as being inhabited by different kinds of people and living and other things, and everyone having an equal place in it, and providing an opportunity to understand and appreciate these differences. It’s not about making everything same.”

Now, coming to the story, the rendition is beautiful. It is the story of who would succeed the king in Manipur. The king has three sons and one daughter. Instead of following the primogeniture, the
king says that times have changed and succession should not be determined by birth, it is the worthy who should inherit the throne. Therefore, there is a contest among the princes. Since no decision could come out of the contest, they were asked to perform remarkable feats unique to each of them. The eldest son shot through a big tree on his horse and planted his weapon in the heart of the tree. The second son jumped across the tree on his horse. The third son on horseback uprooted the tree. All the king’s subjects felt that the youngest was the strongest because he uprooted the tree.

In the meanwhile, the daughter of the king – the princess – went near the tree and was sad to see it dead. The queen suddenly declared that if anybody deserved to rule the kingdom, it was the princess, because she was concerned about the happiness and well-being of its subjects – humans, trees, animals. Eventually the princess was nominated as the ruler of Kanglaipek.

The beautifully illustrated The King and the Kiang (Tulika, 2007, Rs. 120) is a tale from Sikkim, where grow pink, red and white Rhododendron. It is a tale of a young girl, Kunzang, about whom it was said that 'when she was a baby, her mother had left her in a patch of rhododendron flowers. She grew up on their nectar and her hair was wild and red like their petals, her eyes a deep pink. When she stood among the flowers it was as if she were one of them...But Kunzang spoke to no one, and no one could remember having seen her from very close. She would ride through the valley on a kiang with a flowing mane as red as her hair...“If she looks at you with her crimson eyes, your wishes will come true,” they would say to each other. The people of the mountains were gentle and believing, and no one tried to harm this strange child of the wilderness.'

One day a powerful king, Bhu-pen, who loved horses, stopped in the valley to rest for a day, but stayed on there. Gradually his soldiers mingled with the ordinary people and began to live like them. One day Bhu-pen was struck with wonder to catch a glimpse of Kunzang's kiang, with his 'mane as red as the setting sun', and he made up his mind to have it. The people of the valley were very afraid to know this. They told the king that the girl who rides the kiang was no ordinary being: “If she looks at you kindly, your wishes will be fulfilled. But if she is angry, the valley will be destroyed.”
The king did not believe these “stories”. His soldiers laid a trap and a large willow net fell on the child and the steed. As the soldiers took them away to the camp, clouds began to gather, the valley grew dark, a chilly wind began to blow harder and thunder echoed through the mountains. It went on like this hours and the storm refused to relent. Suddenly, through the thick mist, there came a cry asking the king to set the scarlet-eyed child and her kiang free. An old woman appeared before the tent and explained that it was nature's wrath and that it was because of Kunzang, the child of the wilderness, that the valley was so prosperous and peaceful that it drove away the thought of battle even from the mind of hardened warriors. As the king was pondering on this piece of truth, his soldiers came running and exclaimed that the rhododendrons of the valley were dying. The king immediately ordered to set the captives free and no sooner did they do it that the winds stopped howling and the sunlight began to break. The king was sad because of the rhododendrons. While asking for forgiveness, he looked into Kunzang's eyes and asked for this one wish and it was granted as the nature's child cantered away on her kiang past the flowers blooming back to loveliness.

*The Why-Why Girl* (Tulika, 2003, Rs. 100) is a story written by Mahashweta Devi and translated into many languages by eminent people like Paul Zacharia (Malayalam), Ambai (Tamil) and Girish Karnad (Kannada). This is a true story about Moyna, a Shabar girl whom the author came to know while working for the Shabar Samiti. In the blurb of the story, Mahashweta Devi writes, 'All over India there are children, tribal and non-tribal, who always ask the question 'Why?'...I have found that because tribal children are close to nature in mind, it is easy to explain things scientifically to them. They truly love nature.' Moyna is a young girl who asks 'why' after every remark, instruction, request – right from why not to catch a snake to why to thank the babu for the food when Moyna does his chores and he never thanks her for that; why to walk so far to the river to fetch water; why to live in a leaf hut; why can they not eat rice twice a day; why to eat the left-overs of the landlords and babus; why to graze the babu's goats; why can the fish not speak; why do the stars look small when some of them are bigger than the sun; so on and so forth. One day she asked the author why she read books before she went to sleep. The answer changed her life forever: “Because books have the answers to your whys!” Moyna then learnt how to read and this is how she got the answers to most of her questions – stars look small because they live far away, fish speak the language of silence etc. I
wonder what answers she got to her other questions, but she started asking further questions: why do classes in the village school get over at 11, when the children goatherds and cowherds come back from the field after 11 and can, therefore, not attend these classes. Gradually she started teaching her elder brother and little sister that hands should be washed before eating if one wants to avoid pain in the stomach...Eventually, at 18, Moyna became a teacher at the Samiti – a teacher, impatient with lack of curiosity: “Don't be lazy. Ask me questions. Ask me why mosquitoes should be destroyed, why the pole star is always in the north sky.”

Another book in the Wordbird series is *Gulla and the Hangul* (Tulika, 2008, Rs. 125). 'This story from Kashmir, where the hangul is a protected animal, carries the many shades and tones of the region – the quiet life of the villagers in the valley, their close link with nature, as well as the underlying disquiet that they learn to live with. The illustrations evoke the rugged, rocky and less familiar part of the beautiful state with a soft charm.' 'On the slopes live the people of this valley, simple shepherds who know little of the world outside. They work hard in the warmer months, because they know the winter will be long and difficult. They live close together like the pines, in large families.' The village of Tangdaaar was once hit by a devastating earthquake, in which Gulla, a shepherd boy, even lost some of his cousins. One day while coming back from the forest, Gulla spotted a hangul being chased by two wild dogs. Forgetting all about the dangers of the jungle – wild animals, the Banbudhiya (an old woman who eats up men) and military men moving about with guns in hand, ready to shoot – Gulla leapt to save the deer. His desperate attempt to save the vulnerable creature, forgetting his own safety, reminds us of the child in us - the child-like concern for things that we genuinely love, a child is willing to go to any extent to protect something that it finds dear. 'Without thinking, Gulla jumped up and ran behind the dogs...His feet caught on the roots of the pines and he stumbled. But he had to save the deer.' After the night passed into day and Gulla was quite certain that the hangul was now safe, he took it out from his pheran, where it was safely ensconced for the night. Suddenly Gulla saw the hangul turning into a boy of his age – it was Sheen, Spirit of the Eternal Snows, who pleased with Gulla's efforts to save a poor creature, risking his own life, offered to bestow a boon and Gulla instantaneously asked for one thing – that no earthquake should
ever again visit Tangdhaar. Perhaps this is the reason why the hangul is a protected animal among the Kashmiris, as the latter see in it the Spirit of the Sheen who is ever willing to grant a wish.

Set against the backdrop of the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 *Mukund and Riaz* (Tulika, 2007, Rs. 120) ‘is essentially about every child's right to friendship and a home.’ Mukand and Riaz are best friends in Karachi. Mukand wears a red cap, which he refuses to remove as he believes wearing the cap, he can do almost anything. He even refuses to give it to Riaz, his best friend, when he asks for it. Then one day the partition of the country is announced and Riaz helps Mukand and his family to safely leave Karachi and cross the border. But for the sake of their safety, they are required to change into kurtas and Jinnah caps. Just as the ship is about to leave for Bombay, Mukand throws off his favorite red cap at Riaz. They do not meet ever again, but for years after that Mukand is reminded of his friend whenever he sees the Jinnah cap. This story was originally made into a film. It is narrated by Nina Sabnani, whose father is the character of Mukand in the story.

*Wrestling Mania* (Tulika, 2003, Rs. 65) is a folktale from Punjab. The School Library Journal, Portland, OR, USA described it as “…a cultural lesson that entertains and enlightens. This is a winning series for libraries wishing to offer cultural opportunities to young readers.”

It is a tale of fantasy, where a famous wrestler leaves for another village to wrestle with another famous wrestler just for fun and to find out who is stronger of the two. They set off in search of a judge and witness and are carried by a hefty lady in her bag along with camels, goats, trees and what not across the mountains! Another tale of fantasy, embodying the ‘feisty, fun-loving’ Punjabi spirit. The description of burly Punjabi men and women, combined with use of words like Tarlochan, Paramjitta, change, recreates a world where ‘there were no winners, no losers. Just a wish that came true for two young wrestlers from a land where women and men are strong and brave. Balle! Balle!’

At the end of the book one finds a small box saying: ‘The illustrations capture the flavour of Punjab and the spirit of its fun-loving, feisty people. Phulkari, ‘flower work’, is embroidery typical of Punjab
and has been used in the pictures for ambience. Golden yellow, green and amber silk threads are used in Phulkari to create designs aptly called baag, meaning garden. The stitches have to be perfect, or else the sequence is upset...so perfect, that one wrong stitch is deliberately put in to ward off the evil eye.’ This tale is retold by Sandhya, whose profile says that she ‘believes that translating stories from different cultures and reaching them to children will help bring people together.’

In *Pokiri Parrot and the Needle-nosed Ojha* (Katha, 2007, Rs. 65) Pokiri is the pet parrot of the Rajkumari. He loves to steal mangoes from the groves of the needle-nosed ojha. So, one day the ojha decides to teach him a lesson and steals him away from his mistress. The Rajkumari on her way to rescue the parrot is blessed by the King Cobra, who offers her his pearl that will take her wherever she wants to go. Thus, begins the Rajkumari’s journey across India following the Ojha who flew over the Qutab Minar, the Himalayas, the Sunderbans, Benaras, the Bay of Bengal, Thanjavur, the temples of Madurai, the Nilgiris (Ooty), the Silent Valley National Park, Cherapunjee. After the Rajkumari finally rescues her parrot they fly back riding on a dark cloud, thus, bringing rain to the dry land of Jaisalmer, their home town. At the end of the book, we find two brief sections: (a) 'Fun facts about extraordinary India', giving details about the places over which the characters fly in the story; and (b) 'a glimpse of extraordinary India', which is a map that marks and illustrates the places described.

*The Princess with the Longest Hair* (Katha, 1998, 2004, hardbound Rs. 120, Chitra Katha Award 1998 for outstanding illustrations, Noma Concours Encouragement Prize) is the story of a princess Parineeta who had such long black hair that when spread out, it would give as much shade as a banyan tree. She could never walk for long, as her hair lay heavy on her head. Though everybody praised her hair, she was sad, as she used to look out of her window and wonder about what lay outside the palace walls. The day she was about to turn eighteen and display her hair to the entire kingdom, she quietly left the palace through another door out into the open and unknown: 'Although the ground was rocky, with only shrubs and stunted trees, the moon laid a silver carpet on the dark land for the princess to walk on, and the wind whispered to her.' Soon she saw a woman
with a naked baby out in the cold. The princess was so moved that she gave a handful of her hair to the woman to weave a chaadar for herself and her baby. Next, she came across a few fisherfolk, staring sadly at the sea. They were sad because their nets were torn and they could not afford new nets. Parineeta readily gave away another handful of her hair. Next, she came across a thin cow beside a broken-down shed and used the last locks of her hair to repair the roof of the cowshed.

The last picture in the book shows a bald Parineeta singing and dancing by the river side: ‘Without the burden of her heavy hair, Parineeta felt as light as the rays of the morning sun that were turning the sky blue... Parineeta walked into the forest. She was never seen again. But when her song is carried by the wind down to the river, the fisherfolk smile and say, “That’s our princess!”... Birdwatchers who come in flocks to the forest say the birds here build the most amazing nests that are made of hair – hair that is soft, fine and strong like Parineeta’s.’

*The Song of A Scarecrow* (Katha, Rs. 95) is a beautifully illustrated book that has also won awards for its illustrations. A striking feature of Katha books seemed to be the excellent illustrations. This book is the story of a scarecrow who is tired to being stationed and leading a boring life. So, one fine day, he gives up his profession and leaves the corn field in search of freedom and happiness. When he returns to his field, to his utter dismay, there was not a single corn left on the crops. The crows had eaten all of them. The scarecrow is grief-stricken to see and starts crying, as he is attached to his corns. Gradually he realizes, as the blurb summarizes it, that “everything in our world has a role to play and freedom and responsibility always go together.”

Reading it, I could once again feel that while writing the story, the author must have identified himself with a child. The tears that fell off the cheeks of the scarecrow were not the tears of an adult. Those were the tears of a child, who cries easily when something dear to him is destroyed. I remembered the tears of the ‘little prince’ when his one and only rose had withered away.

The following snippets from the Katha guidelines for authors help to highlight their concerns:
“Katha is looking for contemporary stories that are upbeat, ethical and fun, and that expand the child’s worldview. We are not looking for stories and illustrations that are didactic or overly moral, that are preachy or that talk down to the child. As we know, all stories have a moral, and these are oftentimes stronger when they are not overt and stated.”

“The story should accurately reflect the culture of the region the story is from, and a child’s understanding of the culture and people should be enhanced by the book.”

“The story should preferably have a strong Indian theme and deal with Indian children and their lives, predicaments and worldviews.”

“In Katha we do not mind big words if they truly belong in the story, for we believe children like challenge. We don’t like talking down to children.”

“Is the story gender-sensitive?”

Another story, *Hanuman’s Adventures in the Nether World* (Katha, 2005, hardbound Rs. 200) was absolutely breath-taking. It deals with a lesser-known episode in Ramayana – Hanuman’s attempts to rescue Rama and Lakshmana from the magic kingdom of Mayil Ravana.

As a rendition of a classic epic, the book does justice to the fun and suspense that perhaps a kid expects while taking up such a book. It is also likely to appeal to children because Hanuman is the hero of fantastic feats. Incidentally, though this book deals with a grown-up Hanuman, the portrayal of Hanuman renders him child-like. In fact, he is even called “baby-like Hanuman”. The illustrations look as if done by children. All these factors might help kids to identify themselves easily with the book.

The language is beautiful: “He’s [Vayu is] the life breath of this earth, the prana. He is the sweet-scented zephyr that stirs the leaves of the trees in the forest; the cool gust that brings the first smell of rain. He is the dust devil that dances in the desert; the raging cyclone that sinks entire fleets out at sea.” Incidentally, the names used (Mayil Ravana, Macchavallavan) and also some expressions
(Namaskaramma) sound South-Indian, which, following the guidelines, indicates that there is no attempt to hide where the story comes from, but on the contrary, like the Tulika books, helps to naturalize diversity. In the specific context of the Ramayana, it also highlights the many other Ramayanas that children are never told about. The choice of this particular episode also underscores the fun element that exists in Ramayana. I would like to compare this book with tales of Hanuman brought out by other publishers. This is a book I enjoyed reading immensely and endeared to me, for once, the character of Hanuman!

The story 'Hanuman and the Sun God' from *The Monkey God and Other Hindu Tales* by Debjani Chatterjee (Rupa, 1993, reprint 2000, Rs. 50) offers another touching depiction of child Hanuman. Right from the story of his birth, depicted beautifully through Vayu falling in love with the monkey-goddess Anjana, to that of mischievous and fun-loving Hanuman trying to chase the sun-god, the story captures movingly and succinctly the travails of bringing up a child as exceptional as Hanuman. Strong and invincible as his father himself, yet immature enough to want to grab the sun, child Hanuman invites Indra's wrath, who hits the child hard with his thunderbolt. Angered at the display of such impatience towards his son, Vayu disappears from the earth, leaving the whole world to gradually choke to death. It is then that Brahma, accompanied by Indra, ashamed of his impudence, comes to assuage Vayu and they both end up bestowing all kinds of boon on Hanuman. Vayu then points out that all these boons of strength and immortality would be rendered futile if Hanuman did not have the wisdom where to use his strength and to what extent. The gracious lords then bestow the boon of wisdom too on Hanuman. Though this story, unlike the previous one, does not delve deep into the recesses of Hanuman's mind, it does somehow illustrate the plight of a child who is unusually gifted yet does not have the maturity to use his gifts for the right purpose. The emphasis on the shameful act of the king of gods hitting a mere child out of anger does underscore the fact that children need our patience and understanding. In both the Hanuman stories, however, something that comes out touchingly is the very caring attitude father Vayu has towards son Hanuman - he is there by his side through every ordeal, gently guiding and supporting him.
IV.

**General conclusions**

As pointed out earlier, this is a representative, rather than a comprehensive study. As such, the general conclusions arrived at, at the end of the project, are provisional and subject to revision when further evidence shows up facts to the contrary or when the issue is judged from a different perspective. Another reason why these conclusions do not hold true for the large part of the storybook industry is that the works analyzed here belong to a really, really small section of the books that are in circulation in the market. They are usually available in select bookstores and with the range of prices, also inhabit bookshelves in select homes – too select to account for the reading population at large. However, an analysis of this microscopic minority simply helps us to take into consideration the change, albeit positive, taking place in the realm of children’s literature in India.

The general conclusions that I wish to draw from the above discussion are as follows:

- As far as the gender issue is concerned, we see in the books analyzed above a sensitivity regarding the issue. Touching portrayals of the princess of Kanglaipek, Kanzung, Moyna and the princess with the longest hair have made these characters memorable. There is some stereotyping involved in these portrayals. For instance, they have usually been depicted as nurturers and care-givers – responsible, mature, keen and strikingly close to nature (at times, representing nature herself). However, these portrayals also speak to us of strong, independent-minded women and of changing ‘gender roles’ in a changing world. On the other hand, one also comes across a sensitive boy like Gulla, who is equally caring about nature or for that matter, a scarecrow, who can weep for the corns that are destroyed because of his irresponsibility. But, perhaps, at times, as children, the distinction between a boy or a girl is blurred. Another interesting aspect that was pointed out in a CRY meeting was that most of the authors and publishers of these stories are women – modern, self-dependent, working women! At the risk of sounding stereotypical, is then story-telling for children intimately related to the experience of womanhood?

- In terms of the portrayal of regions, one can discern that certain characteristics have been attributed to the people of various regions of India – nature-loving and peace-loving
mountain people, feisty and fun-loving people of Punjab etc. Here too, some amount of stereotyping is involved, but we cannot ignore the genuine efforts being made to represent a community as sensitively and as sincerely as possible. Besides, efforts have been made to bring out the ‘authentic’ elements in a particular culture.

- We have not come across too many stories that take up the question of religious difference with all its complexities and challenges. Is this a chance omission or too sensitive a chord to strike?

- The way stories of Hanuman have been rendered have really, to my mind, taken away any ‘religious’ character from the story that one might try to attribute to it. These stories have come across more as stories of childhood than as those of an important Hindu deity.

- But for a story by somebody like Mahashweta Devi (for whom it is natural to write the story of a tribal girl), the issue of backwardness (caste, tribe and class) has been poorly represented. Even when poverty is dealt with (The Princess with the Longest Hair), it is usually a very abstract engagement, and nothing as concrete as the real problems faced by Indian children, who belong to an underprivileged background, have been taken up so far.

I would like to conclude by saying that there are apparently three ways of writing for children. One, to take into account what would be popular with the reader and dish that out. Second, to have some fixed notions in mind about what would make a ‘good’ (read ‘instructive’, ‘moral’) story and try to follow that prescription. And third, to simply start writing, as one feels like and see where the story takes us! As I wrote earlier, this report aims the least to be prescriptive, attempting only to throw up interesting issues and genuine concerns in the contemporary domain of children’s literature in India. Hope this study has been successful in fulfilling its aim. I am thankful to CRY for having made this venture possible and my sincere gratitude remains to its team members and judges for their warmth and constant enthusiasm and interest in the project.