Indian Children’s Literature: How the Past is Eroding the Present

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Even though they were not originally created as stories for children, the classical myths of Greece and Rome, stories from Norse mythology and our own great religious epics the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and the Puranas have proved to be both popular and enduring when retold for young readers. Unlike the myths of the west, which are well liked as fascinating stories, Indian myths being part of living religious beliefs serve a more important purpose. They help to impart ethical values and religious knowledge; hence their narration enjoys a validity that survives to this day. Paradoxically, this enormous bank of traditional stories in our country, which could have served to stimulate creativity, has actually stifled the growth of original children’s literature.

Along with other tales from the oral tradition, myths became popular as children’s stories when grandfathers and grandmothers discovered they were excellent for providing moral and religious instruction to children besides diverting them. Thus, generations of Indian children grew up listening to these stories while they were coaxed into finishing their meals or going to sleep.

This tradition had a significant effect on the evolution of children’s literature in India. When printing was introduced and the importance of developing a separate body of reading material for children was recognized, this fund of stories supplied easily accessible material for writers and publishers to draw upon. And since stories for children have always had an aim beyond improving reading skills or providing information or knowledge—to guide young minds—this literature, ratified over the ages for its values, seemed ideal.

In the course of time, original literature for children began to be created. However, even when it displayed excellent quality, it failed to match the allure of the retold myths. The main reason being that in a country like ours where tradition is sacrosanct, parents, who usually select books for their children, feel far more comfortable buying retold versions of stories based on mythology. Being familiar with these tales from their own childhood, they are confident that they are providing the right kind of literature for their kids. Reading myths will keep the young in touch with their heritage, culture or religion, they feel, and inculcate the correct values. These issues acquire greater weight in urban nuclear families where grandparents, who traditionally passed on these stories, are not around and the pressures of contemporary existence mean that parents have little time to fulfill this role themselves.

This fascination with myths is evident when we consider that the greatest success story of publishing for children in our country is the Amar Chitra Katha series of comic books, largely based on traditional stories. On the other hand it would be hard to identify even one book by a contemporary Indian writer that has enjoyed nationwide popularity.

But can we blame parents for rejecting original contemporary children’s literature? The truth is, they have no way of assessing its worth. Children’s books are seldom reviewed in newspapers or magazines, nor are their writers given any kind of exposure in the media. Publishers too either lack resources or feel it is not worth their while to promote such books. Reading promotion programmes, which could disseminate such information, are scattered and remain ineffective.

How does this effect the development of a vibrant body of children’s literature in our country? It is wonderful that our children have access to a vast treasure of captivating myths. But they also need a literature that tells their own stories and provides role models drawn from their immediate lives. While they might be moved by the story of Rama’s exemplary life, thrilled by Hanuman’s feats, inspired by Arjun’s valour and fascinated by Krishna’s complex personality, their reading experience remains incomplete without a fiction which is more present-day. They need stories that deal with current issues, science fiction, the adventures of children like themselves and all the different kinds of stories that are being written for children in other parts of the world.

Award winning children’s writer Katherine Paterson states in A Sense of Wonder, her fascinating book on writing for children, “Mythology and fairy tales deal directly with archetypes...they help children...to face and conquer their inner dragons.” She goes on to talk about fiction: “In fiction, you see, our medium is not the archetypal forms but human experience, which is truth at a very earthly level.”

It is this human experience and truth at the earthly level that is sadly in short supply for Indian children. While many talented writers have struggled to offer their best for children, this conservative attitude on the part of parents and publishers, combined with the indifference of the media, ensures that there are few takers for their work. In the meantime, shoddily produced, poorly written and indifferently selected stories from mythology continue to flood the market and our children remain deprived of a variety of choice in their reading matter even as Indian children’s literature continues to remain short of originality.