CHILDREN'S BOOKS

An Indian Story

Edited by

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Children's Books: An Indian Story

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A Note from Parag

The Parag initiative of Tata Trusts has had the privilege of working with a small but growing tribe of passionate individuals and organisations who have dedicated their lives to Indian children's literature and reading promotion in India. Content creators, independent publishers and educators have been working together for the last few decades to create children's books in multiple Indian languages and make them accessible to children from diverse backgrounds. As this story continues to unfold, we felt the need for a book that reflects on the status of Indian children's literature at this time. Through the process of its creation, we also felt that we could collectively, and with a critical eye, understand the landscape that is being shaped through the work of authors, illustrators, publishers, non-profit organisations and educators in developing diverse books and facilitating their use in multiple contexts.

The idea became a reality only after many rounds of discussions with and among experts and practitioners, and through the efforts of the exceptional editorial team of Dr Shailaja Menon and Ms Sandhya Rao who crafted the book passionately. Each author who contributed to this volume

generously has brought a unique perspective about the emerging field of Indian children's literature. Eklavya was our natural choice as a publishing partner, given its long-standing commitment to children's literature and educational publishing. Ms Taposhi Ghoshal illustrated the engaging book cover. We are deeply grateful to each one of them.

We sincerely hope that this book will be read by a wide range of readers and will generate discussion, critique and responses that contribute to discourse building. We also hope that in the years to come, it will pave the way for more volumes examining children's literature from a socio-historical perspective and for writing that analyses trends in children's literature in multiple Indian languages.

Amrita Patwardhan
Head, Education
Tata Trusts
May 2024

Introduction: Seasons of Change

Shailaja Menon and Sandhya Rao

In a rural village in Rajasthan, people are crowded around a makeshift pandal put up in their village.[1] *Grey-haired men wearing bright turbans and white dhotis sit alongside the women, some of whom are ghunghat-clad. A nine-year-old girl stands up in their midst and holds up the book* Kyun Kyun Ladki *(Mahasweta Devi). Bashfully at first, and later with increasing excitement, she narrates the story presented in the book to the village elders. The audience listens with rapt attention, and when she finishes, the book is passed around from hand to hand as groups of people look at the pictures and words, wondering in hushed tones. The venue of the event is Kahani Mela—a storytelling festival, organised by an NGO working in that village with an aim to involve and engage the rural (and largely illiterate) community with the world of books that their children are exploring at school.*

And then, there is a story of some vintage, from a time when the National Book Trust was actively engaged in sending 'book buses' to several remote parts of the country in an effort to bring libraries to the reach of the unreached. From all accounts, children awaited the arrival of this mobile library with great excitement and enthusiasm. On one such occasion, in a small village in Uttar Pradesh, a five- or six-year-old boy grabbed the book

he was handed—in exchange for payment, of course—and made straight for a shady tree, clambered up, settled into a comfortable nook in the branches, and started to read. The librarian, who was charmed by the child's reaction, looked up into the tree and discovered that the book was held upside down!

More recently, in the city of Bhopal in Madhya Pradesh, people are crowded into a large hall. On the stage is a young woman, maybe in her late 20s. She is reading out a poem that she has recently written for children in Hindi, from a poetry collection that has not yet been published. She reads out several poems from this collection, receiving applause, appreciation, and suggestions from the audience of authors, illustrators and publishers of children's literature. She is followed on the stage by a veteran, well-published author, who reads aloud a short story. Illustrations from children's books adorn the walls of the hall. The event is hosted by a publisher of children's books who is trying to bring about a transformation in the production of contemporary children's literature in India.

These and many more vignettes offer a kaleidoscope of images of the creation and usage of children's literature in India, which is currently developing and expanding at an unprecedented rate. They speak of storytelling festivals, pop-up bookstores, author and illustrator meets, mobile libraries and more, that dot the contemporary landscape. Literature with an appeal to children has deep roots in Indian oral and performative traditions, and numerous (and noteworthy) attempts to carve out and cater to the 'child' segment have existed during colonial times and during the post-Independence era. However, this book focuses most of its attention on post-liberalisation shifts in children's literature that have happened over the past three decades.

The sheer volume of publishing for children has expanded substantially during this time. With India's overall economy growing, the economy of publishing for children has also expanded, and is projected to increase rapidly over the next several years. There are more people involved in producing children's literature—publishers, authors, illustrators, translators, editors, and so on—than ever before. There is also a larger audience for it—through NGO-run libraries, schools, and middle-class parents purchasing books for their children. Children's books have grown into a prolific industry, expanding in topics, covering various genres, and aimed at varied age and population groups.

For the most part, the expansion in volume has been quantitative—with mythology, folktales and educational books continuing to dominate the overall market. But, along with this explosion, a smaller, visible qualitative change is also under way, spearheaded by small, independent publishing houses and some larger international ones. These publishers have expanded the genres available, with notable developments in the production of picture books, literary nonfiction and Young Adult (YA) literature. There have been seminars and discussions, and occasional papers written on the subject, and a mushrooming of children's literature festivals all over urban and middle-class India. Children's books receive awards at the national and local levels. Yet, given India's large, diverse and multilingual character, both the production and consumption of children's books are mere drops in terms of actual needs.

Even so, the recent body of work has assumed a certain critical proportion, enough to warrant a conversation about it. This book is an attempt to start off that conversation amongst individuals interested in the topic, including students, authors, publishers, illustrators, translators, editors, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working in the domain, and others.

A Brief History

While written literature for children in India has a shorter history than what prevails in many other parts of the world, its roots are embedded in oral and performative traditions that stretch back nearly 5,000 years. The Indian subcontinent has been a repository of stories for centuries: the Kathasaritsagara, Panchatantra and Jataka tales are cases in point, apart from epics such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, and stories featuring iconic characters such as Mullah Nasruddin, Sheikh Chilli, Birbal and Tenali Rama. Storytellers did not distinguish between adults and children; their stories were for everyone. Only a few specialised genres (such as lullabies and riddles) or collections (such as the Panchatantra) existed purely for the consumption of children. At the same time, the practice of telling children stories, particularly at mealtimes, was widespread. Cultural lore, mythology and folk narratives were carried across regions and generations through performative traditions, such as, song, art, dance and theatrical forms.

Colonialism strongly impacted children's literature in India, carving it out as a special and distinct category of literature designed both for the consumption and the production of the modern child. During the nineteenth century, School Book Societies (established by the British Raj in different presidencies) were charged with creating suitable literature for children. These societies published a large body of moral and mythological tales, and books on science, geography, and so on in numerous Indian languages, as well as in English. Children's versions of the Bible were translated into multiple languages as a part of missionary efforts in different parts of the country. Children's magazines also appeared in several Indian languages, which were a rich source of information (regarding science, health, hygiene, and so on) as well as pleasure-reading for children. Banerjee reports that when the National Library of India (the erstwhile Imperial Library, under the British Raj) compiled a bibliography of children's literature in Bengali, it listed over 5,000 books and 133 periodicals published during 1818–1962![2] The different genres of children's literature in colonial times included stories, advice, descriptions, scientific information, biographies, poems, riddles and more. Similar bodies of literature started emerging in various other Indian languages as well, and were disseminated by similar means, using magazines and texts created by School Book Societies as ways to educate and entertain youth.

Since this was the period of carving out a special literature for children in India, it would be worthwhile to pause and briefly examine an unstated assumption and an important consequence of doing so. First, the assumption. 'Children's literature' presumes children who can read, have access to books, and the leisure to read. In light of the prevailing low literacy levels during the colonial period, we can be fairly certain that the reading population was a limited, fairly privileged subset of the total population, and a predominantly male one. Therefore, the literature intended for 'children's' use, was intended for the use of this small subset, and did not reflect (for the most part) the multiple worlds of childhood and children.

Second, the consequence. Once a distinct category of literature is carved out for the consumption of children, it is inevitable that the adults who edit, publish, review and teach these books construct childhood in particular ways. As Banerjee notes in her analysis of Bengali literature

published during the colonial era, texts for children were largely created by the "respectable middle classes", and envisioned the aspirations of this class to reform society by producing a certain kind of child—a future citizen subject, if male, and a good mother and housewife, if female. This can be contrasted to older, oral traditions where literature was not designed to be consumed only by children; hence, there was less gatekeeping and adult control, and children could presumably access and enjoy a wider selection of material. In fact, like all mythological stories and folktales, most of the oral folklore of the subcontinent included vivid allusions to violence, sexuality and so on that are often deemed as inappropriate for the consumption of children in written canons. Western scholars of children's literature such as Perry Nodelman have referred to this phenomenon as "the hidden adult" element of children's literature—where adults guide and gatekeep the content, style and messaging of children's books.[3] While it may seem commonsensical to many that adults would have a dominant hand in what is consumed by children, the word 'hidden' signals that adult roles in the production and consumption of literature are often assumed, and rarely examined, nudging us to critically examine the social positioning and motives of the adults involved in various roles—from those producing the books, to those selecting books for libraries and homes.

The trend of creating texts that produced and reflected the subjectivity of the ideal citizen-subject continued in various forms after Independence, when nation-building emerged as an important theme. Magazines like *Chandamama* (established in 1947 in Telugu and Tamil), as well as publishing houses such as the National Book Trust (NBT) and the Children's Book Trust (CBT) (both established in 1957) started producing literature for the children of a newly independent India. *Chandamama* eventually started publishing in English and 12 other Indian languages, largely continuing to produce retellings of mythological and folk tales. On the other hand, NBT and CBT introduced readers to more contemporary stories that reflected an Indian ethos and culture. Noteworthy authors and illustrators like Pulak Biswas, Badri Narayan and Shankar created titles of enduring appeal to children during this period. Adaptations and translations of English literature, as well as translations of Russian and Chinese literature appeared in different Indian languages. Meena Khorana's *The Indian Subcontinent in Literature for Children and Young*

Adults lists more than 900 annotated entries of literature produced for children in the English language, post-Independence, up until the late 1980s.[4] These entries attest to the existence of a variety of genres, such as traditional literature (mythological stories and folktales), fiction (historical, realistic and fantasy), poetry, drama, biography and autobiography, and information books.

Despite the number and variety of books available during this period, most Indian publications, with a few exceptions, were low-cost productions; this was largely achieved by eliminating illustrations or keeping them to a minimum, and by not investing in design. From the time of the establishment of NBT, the mission of several Indian publishers has been to produce low-cost books that could reach as many children as possible—a trend that continues to date. Unlike NBT, most other publishers have little or no state support—making costing of children's literature a critical feature of book production in India, given the inability of wide swathes of the population to afford high priced books, and the lack of a cultural ethos that might persuade the middle classes to spend on books that are not seen as essential to children's education.

Contemporary Trends

Children's literature, like all cultural artifacts, is produced at the intersection of historical, political, social, and economic influences. After liberalisation in the early 1990s and the opening up of the economy, a market was discovered for selling books to urban, middle-class children, and their well-educated, informed parents and schools. Small, independent publishing houses began to appear in the early 1990s and continue to proliferate. These publishers began producing a small but determined stream of innovative books paying attention to illustrations, production and design, and creative means of distribution. They expanded the range of genres and many of them experimented with finding and expressing an Indian ethos, sensibility and voice through their books. Meanwhile, of course, the big players also grew their economies; in their ranks were the textbook publishers, always the biggest segment of the 'children's books' market. Next, we take a quick look at a few contemporary trends that inform the chapters of this book.

Children's Publishing: A Few Quick Facts

In order to begin to understand the industry, and the phenomenon of children's books in a country that is hugely multicultural and multilingual, it is important to have some background information regarding the trade. According to a recent report on the status of children's publishing in India released by Neev Literature Festival (NLF), nearly 50 percent of all books published in India are either in English or Hindi.[5] Nearly 71 percent of all books printed are accounted for by school books, and only 4 percent of total print publications (for adults and children) is accounted for by books written for entertainment and enjoyment (referred to as "trade books"). Some 25 percent of trade books published in India are for children and young adults—which means that trade books for children account for possibly 1 percent of the total print publications. This is to put the "unprecedented expansion in children's literature" referred to earlier in context.

International publishing houses, like Penguin Random House, HarperCollins and Hachette (the 'Big Three' publishers) dominate and enjoy a disproportionate share of the Indian children's book market. They offer a mixture of Indian and international titles. Amongst domestic publishers, Dreamland Publications are the largest sellers of children's books in India. Other publishers like Scholastic and Om Books create mass-market books that sell widely. Wonder House, an imprint of Prakash Books, has emerged as the top player in selling interactive, or novelty (puzzles, pop-up and activity) books to children in the 0–8 years segment. Domestic mass-market publishing houses continue to produce and sell retellings of traditional, mythological and moralistic tales, comic books, activity books, and often poorly produced adaptations and translations of English novels. These books attract the bulk of the consumers. We have seen that textbook publishing dominates the industry; and indeed, most of what children read—those who can read or have access to reading—is what is in their textbooks.

Amongst book titles, international titles are more popular among English-speaking Indian children, with the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid: Big Shot* topping the list in terms of sales in 2022. Amongst Indian authors, only a couple, such as Sudha Murty and Ruskin Bond, sell well, perhaps because the parents who select books for their children can relate both Murty's and

Bond's styles of storytelling to their own childhoods in urban, middle-class India. Anthologies, book series, early learning and activity books are the top-selling segments of children's books in English.

The larger landscape of publishing houses and books being sold to the English-speaking child/young adult population in India has not influenced the analyses presented in this book as much as have the indie publishing houses, which are noted for creating experimental and innovative trends in publishing children's literature that reflect Indian ethos and realities. The NLF report identified 14 such publishers as "thriving" (see Table 1), and these have driven the trends and examples presented in many chapters in this book.

Table 1. Thriving Indie Publishing Houses

1. Pratham Books
2. Duckbill (now a part of Penguin Random House India, but very editorially driven and still an independent publisher in spirit)
3. Tulika Publishers
4. Eklavya
5. Ektara
6. Mango Books (Children's division of DC books)
7. Tara Books
8. Pickle Yolk
9. Talking Cub
10. Ponytale Books
11. Tota Books (Children's imprint of Full Circle Books)
12. Good Earth Books
13. Karadi Tales
14. Kalpavriksh

Source: NLF Report (2023)

Regional Language Publishing and Translations

A study commissioned by the British Council on trends and challenges in regional language publishing in India notes the lack of consistent and robust data and statistics about publishing in these languages, including the volume of books published by language and readership surveys, output of significant state-led and supported initiatives, and market insight that informs and aids economic growth for the sector.[6] Despite the lack of

sufficient information about publishing in regional languages, we would not be amiss in stating that overall, children's publishing in regional languages has not kept pace with developments in English language children's publishing in terms of experimenting with genres, illustrations and design. The British Council study noted that for adult publishing, there is a thriving 'pulp fiction' industry in several major regional languages, although regional language publishing doesn't always distinguish pulp or mass-market books from more literary fiction. This would be true for children's literature as well, with mass-market books being far more numerous in both English and regional languages than literary fiction and nonfiction. However, the small but significant push given to publishing in English with the advent of independent publishers doesn't have a clear parallel in the larger world of regional language publishing for children.

Of course, there are exceptions. In Hindi, for example, publishing houses like Ektara have been bringing out contextually relevant and innovative publications—both books and magazines; and Riyaaz is a hands-on academy for young illustrators that is working on improving the quality of illustrations in children's books. But, by and large, regional languages have lacked the resources (and perhaps, the drive) to publish innovative books for children.

In lieu of organic development of literature in regional languages, we have seen some publishers adopt the strategy of 'multilingual publishing', where the publisher simultaneously develops the same book in several Indian languages. It was NBT that first pointed in this direction, with some publishers following suit several years later. Storyweaver is a relatively recent example of a platform where open-source publication and translations have been used to create a massive online database of Pratham books in different languages. Another approach, which could be called an innovation, is dual language publishing; here, texts in two languages appear simultaneously in one book. Tulika Publishers was a trendsetter in this area and after facing initial resistance from consumers, including schools/school teachers, this form has begun to catch on slowly.

Simultaneous translation has its pros and cons. On the one hand, it becomes possible to reach large numbers of children speaking different languages at relatively low cost, while making accessible to them a range of literary genres that they would otherwise rarely be exposed to. On

the other, the quality of translation tends to be uneven across languages, especially in languages that the editors have little knowledge of. Further, regional nuances, such as those pertaining to food, language use, setting, humour and so on, often don't get reflected. Still, it is undeniable that such efforts play an important role in a context where both regional language publishing as well as efforts to translate individual books are unable to meet the needs on the ground for large numbers of children to access a wide variety of quality literature on a regular basis. Translations from one Indian language to another are practically non-existent, barring the occasional effort. Besides, such initiatives find few sponsors, and fewer distributors. It all boils down to numbers that will monetise profitably.

Another significant reason for the poor performance of the regional language market is the absence of a thriving library movement, whether in schools or at the state or national level. There is no practice of schools and libraries regularly buying books and updating libraries as prevails in the West. Nor is primacy given to local languages that reflect the cultures and contexts of children and families across the country. Although the matter of English and other Indian languages, particularly Hindi, has become a politically and economically motivated issue in recent times, we know that this cannot fulfil children's fundamental right to good books in their own language or languages of choice, books that are accessible to them and that help stimulate their mind and imagination.

Genres

As noted earlier, a wide variety of genres of children's literature has been available since colonial times. However, the past three decades have seen significant expansion in three genres, in particular—picture books, young adult novels and literary nonfiction—which deserves commentary.

The one space where children today have a wide choice is picture books, which are getting more creative and innovative. This is a genre that has expanded in the recent decades, accompanying a better understanding of the importance of visuals in reading, and that more words do not necessarily make for 'quality' literature. This awareness and an increased capability and willingness to invest more in the economics of producing high quality illustrations have opened up the picture book genre, now bolstered by high quality production standards.

Illustrated books for children have been around since the colonial era, and the Indian market was flooded during the 1960s and 1970s with beautifully and richly illustrated Russian and Chinese literature for children. But the 'picture book' is somewhat distinct from these genres and is a relatively recent literary entrant into the Indian market. So, how is the picture book different from illustrated books? As Lawrence Sipe describes it:

> …the words and pictures, equally important, stand in complex relationships with each other, and …the pictures do not merely "illustrate" what's already said in the verbal text, but add something different and new, so that the synergy between words and pictures adds up to something greater than the sum of its parts.[7]

Put differently, the words rely on the pictures to complete the story, and the pictures rely on the words to provide a continuous narrative. Independent publishing houses in India have invested a great deal of energy, attention and resources in producing beautiful picture books over the last few decades. Parag, in a 2012–2013 study, noted that although this genre has expanded, offerings for the 0–6 years age range are still low in comparison to those for slightly older age groups.[8] Though dated, the findings of this survey hold even today, with offerings for the youngest age groups being scarce.

Literature for young adults is another category that perhaps was not carved out as a distinct segment in earlier times, but has been linked to the social construction of a special segment of individuals in contemporary economies and societies. The teenage years were traditionally a period of rapid transition into adulthood from childhood. But, with modern societies prolonging education and delaying marriage and entry into job markets, a new developmental phase has been created of prolonged adolescence, especially amongst the middle classes. The needs of this new developmental phase, and its buying power, are catered to by the YA genre. The expansion of this literature has taken place largely in the realistic fiction genre, and tends to explore the social institutions and conventions that shape adolescent lives, and to address specific problems and concerns particular to this age group. The 'problem novel' typifies this genre, which deals with topics that are uncomfortable, yet are seen as relevant or necessary for young adults to grapple with.

A third area of qualitative change has been in the production of literary nonfiction. While illustrated encyclopaedias, biographies and nonfiction series books (like the *How and Why Wonder Book* series) have been in the Indian market for a long time, the nonfiction being currently published has a self-consciousness about qualifying as high-quality literature. As Kiefer and Wilson note in their discussion of literary nonfiction in the West: "Good nonfiction, like fiction, is an art form, designed to give pleasure, and enlightenment, to arouse wonder, and to reveal our capacity for self-awareness and understanding."[9] Writers and publishers of nonfiction have pushed the envelope in recent years in terms of creating a new body of 'creative' or literary nonfiction in India.

The genres of poetry and drama, by comparison, are lagging behind other genres in terms of development and output. Perhaps this is reflective of the overall market—even for the adult section, poetry and drama are consumed less in their written forms as compared with fiction and nonfiction books. Therefore, it is possible that the 'hidden adults' who create and buy books for children don't prioritise these genres quite as much as the others.

Imaginations of the Child Reader

The intent of producing children's literature has shifted over time from moral instruction, and enlightening and entertaining a rational being about the world around them (during colonial era), to nation-building (in the post-Independence era), to contemporary trends towards realism in a multicultural, capitalist, post-liberalisation India (at least in the books published in English by the independent publishing houses). The imagination of the consumer has correspondingly shifted to that of a child who reads for pleasure, needs contextually relevant books for her well-being and development, enjoys relatively democratic relationships with adults, and is able to participate in a complex world with nuance and subtlety. There is a push to free children from their place of innocence and safety to a point where they take their place side-by-side with adults. Of course, these trends hold only for books aspiring to the high quality, literary niche, and not necessarily for more mass-market oriented books.

The media theorist and cultural critic, Neil Postman, has remarked in his 1994 book on childhoods in the West that we seem to have come almost full circle, from the push to carve out a distinct space for children from adults, to a point where childhood is disappearing at a dazzling speed in terms of the increasing blurring of distinctions between adult and child spheres of activity, for example, through media and internet usage.[10] It is not just in terms of clothing styles or spheres of activity, though, that the boundaries between childhood and adulthood are blurring, but also in terms of the sophisticated thinking that is being asked of children. Knowledge, rather than innocence, seems to be how adult writers imagine the pleasure of children in contemporary writings. It is not the imparting of specific scientific or rational knowledge that we seem to be aiming at in contemporary times (as it was in the colonial era), but of more self-conscious, reflective perspectives of the world and of our place(s) and relationships within it.

Much of children's literature published in India today presumes the middle-class, urban child as its reader. Arguably, attempts to bring in multicultural elements into books do not significantly shift the presumed reader of the multicultural text from her class and urban moorings. Including different realities in books is often a way to introduce middle-class children to the varied experiences of 'other' children in their country, or to sensitise them to issues related to inequity, injustice, indigenous art forms and so on, rather than to directly address the marginalised reader. Books that directly address children from marginalised sections of society are relatively rare. Here, we remember the instance of a child from the fishing community, who, upon being given a Tamil edition of *My Friend, the Sea*, commented that finally, after always only him reading about other children, 'they' would now read about children like himself!

The producers of these books—editors, illustrators, publishers—are also largely urban and middle-class themselves, with a few notable exceptions. In a country where mass literacy is only just under way, it is perhaps inevitable that it would be the urban middle classes that would both create and consume children's literature. But with the policy fillip to boost early literacy in recent years, multiple publishers are beginning to create multilingual books that are priced affordably, reflect diverse realities and, sometimes, address marginalised readers.

Morals, Values and Didacticism

Liberalism, which underlies the thinking of much of the indie publishing sector at present, urges society to not force its ideas upon individuals, but to leave them free to interpret facts according to their own value systems. This has led to a shift away from overtly moralistic or didactic storytelling traditions in books aspiring to be of higher literary quality. But children's literature has always been a vehicle for transmitting values to its readers. Therefore, as Stevenson has pointed out (about children's literature written in the contemporary period in the West):

> The real objection… isn't so much to books that educate as it is to books that educate in an old-fashioned way. In contemporary literature, morality is rather a Goldilocks problem, avoiding too much (and being like literature of the past) and too little (and being too lightweight) to get it juuust right. When children's literature scholars and practitioners claim to reject texts that teach, what we actually reject is writing that gets caught at teaching.[11]

It is inevitable that the discourses of multiculturalism, equity and so on that permeate postmodern societies make appearances in children's literature as a means of shaping the minds and subjectivities of readers. Today, you will find books on every subject, theme and social issue, and representing diverse social groups (with some authors being more prolific than others in terms of writing to politically correct and trending issues). Arguably, didacticism in contemporary times has simply made a back door re-entry into children's literature, by transforming itself from "literature-as-morality" to "literature-as-social/political-propaganda."[12] The same could be said of the evolution of Indian children's literature, as well; while the hidden adults may have changed how they address or teach children through literature, it is inevitable and clear that they continue to do so.

Mills argues that didacticism in children's books per se may not be as problematic as we may imagine; but, perhaps the most compelling argument against didacticism is that it could lead to the creation of books of inferior literary and aesthetic quality.[13] While we cannot categorically establish that writing to issues has led to the production of inferior quality children's books in the Indian context, we would like to caution readers that issue-based writing is a double-edged sword—on the one hand, it can serve to sensitise child readers about important societal concerns; and on

the other, it could lead to the creation of superficially and inauthentically written books. Additionally, because much of the writing comes from fairly well educated, middle-class authors, some seem to believe that because they know good English, and care about the right issues, they can write well. So, a further dilemma of competent versus high quality writing gets created.

The domain of children's literature in India perhaps needs the presence of more serious litterateurs and less of people who write out of a sense of catering to children's needs. This is not to say that highly talented writers do not currently exist in the domain; they do, and their numbers continue to increase. We would like to see this number overtake the number of people who write in order to teach.

Quality and Authenticity

As has been established in the previous section, the aesthetic dangers of message-driven writing are alive and, if anything, proliferating in our midst, despite the move away from overtly moralistic storytelling. Books are being written in order to represent diverse childhoods and realities—on ragpickers, street children, women in science, children with disabilities, tribal children, Dalit children and so on. This is the Catch-22 situation of children's literature production. If adults don't produce literature that reflects myriad childhoods and realities, the ensuing selections will become highly exclusionary and representative of only elite groups. But, if adults do produce literature catering to and representing diverse realities, they get caught in the double-dilemmas of quality and authenticity.

Should authors write books because children 'need' them, or should books be written because authors feel the need to write a particular book? Can high quality books be written 'to order'? C.S. Lewis, the author of the famed *Narnia* series, takes the stance that "…the only one [way of writing] I could ever use myself, consists in writing a children's story because a children's story is the best art-form for something you have to say."[14] How do we balance this strong stance on quality in literature that Lewis takes, with the need for more diverse and representative literature for a highly stratified and multicultural country?

If adults were to respectfully disagree with Lewis on this matter, and write books to order, they would still run into the issue of authenticity. At

present, most of the adults producing books in English are, as mentioned earlier, from backgrounds of certain class privileges. How authentically can they represent the realities and concerns of the children whose diverse childhoods they are representing? This is not to say that they cannot do so, it cannot be that a writer can only write about what they have personally experienced. And yet, such books raise questions about validity, voice and perspective, which also cannot be ignored.

Dalit writers and critics (who write for adults), like Sharankumar Limbale and Om Prakash Valmiki, have argued that the very aesthetics of Dalit writing is qualitatively different from that of non-Dalit writing.[15] While upper-caste writers use 'art for the sake of art' as their motivation in their writings, the function of much of Dalit writing is to draw attention to Dalit consciousness and their continued marginalisation, and to rescue their stories from oblivion, requiring an alternative aesthetics to represent their pain and experiences. Dalit literature is, therefore, not pleasure-giving literature. Dalit writers claim that when upper-caste authors like Mulk Raj Anand, Premchand, Mahasweta Devi, T.S. Pillai and Girish Karnad try to bring Dalit issues to the attention of the general public, "…these portrayals are often shallow, as they either exalt Dalit individuals by depicting them as heroes, or prioritise eliciting pity for them."[16] Sharma and Batra cite Satyanarayana Kumar commenting on other communities writing about the Dalit experience: "In creative works, such babysitting for other groups and classes is quite awkward."[17]

Unlike the notable body of literature for adults which represent Dalit voices, experiences and aesthetic, the body of children's literature produced by disenfranchised voices is still marginal and small in numbers, and even the awareness that "babysitting" for other groups and classes could be problematic, has not fully developed in writing for children in India. The 'right to write' is a full-fledged topic of discussion and debate in the West, where authors of colour question the right of white people to represent their realities, resulting often in highly problematic and biased representations of situations.[18] Jacqueline Woodson, in her 1998 essay "Who Can Tell My Story?" writes:

> …there were many who believed that while the movement to get a diversity of stories into classrooms and libraries was important, one didn't need to be a person of color to tell these stories. This did and continues to surprise me…. I realized that no one but

> me can tell my story…. Once at a conference I met a woman who had written a book about a family of color. "What people of color do you know?" I asked. "Well," she answered. "It's based on a family that used to work for mine." This family had stepped inside this woman's kitchen, but she had not been inside theirs. And having not sat down to their table, how could she possibly know the language and the experiences and the feelings there? How could she know who they were when they took their outside clothes off at the end of the day and moved from their outside language to the language they shared with family and close friends? How could she know what made them laugh from deep within themselves — a laughter that is not revealed in the boss's kitchen — and what made them cry — the stomach wrenching wails one hides from the outside world? And most of all, why was it this woman needed to tell this story?[19]

This is an important caution for publishers, authors and illustrators in India to keep in mind as they hurry to represent myriad realities and publish multicultural literatures—who are the creators of these books? Also, who are the presumed readers of these books? Will it have something in it that a reader from the group represented could identify with, or has it been published for the sensitisation of other, more privileged groups of readers?

The issue of authenticity has also been addressed through a different solution—by publishing children's writing. Of course, the hand of the adult remains firmly intact in such publications, because it is typically adults who organise workshops, festivals and competitions from which children's writing worth publishing emerges; and it is also adults who select, edit and produce the books. It is not possible or even desirable to subtract the adult from the equation. The effort should be to make the adult hand less 'hidden'—by shining the light on the adults producing and consuming children's books and by raising critical questions regarding their social locations, motivations, and so on.

What is 'Indian' about Indian Children's Literature?

Another question we could ask of the body of work that is represented and analysed in this book is: What is 'Indian' about Indian Children's Literature? This is not a new question. Banerjee, for example, examined

children's literature produced in Bengali during colonial times to ascertain whether it was a "derivative discourse." She concluded that it would be unfair to refer to the body of children's literature produced in India as a discourse entirely derived from the West. Undoubtedly, western influences can be discerned in genres, writing styles, characterisation, even syntax and punctuation styles; and yet, it appears as if Indian children's literature is more an example of "border thinking", a new epistemic space in which the subaltern writer thinks "with, against, and beyond the legacy of Western epistemology."[20] While giants of Western children's literature cast their long shadows on Indian children's literature, the space permits the possibility of entirely new forms and discourses emerging from it. Examples of such possibilities would be books that occupy the hybrid spaces between oral and textual literature; or those that portray contemporary realities using indigenous art forms. Therefore, we concur with Banerjee that there is something distinctive about Indian children's literature—beyond the names and settings and artifacts depicted in the books. The nascent body of literature is definitely on its way to finding and speaking in its own unique voices.

At the same time, in order to retain and develop unique and distinctive voices, it is very important that the organic relationship between Indian literature and its oral and performative roots be built upon. There is a prevalent sensibility amongst some, that views mythological stories and folktales as regressive or not sophisticated enough for modern audiences. Rather than attempting to mimic Western aesthetics, it is important to find and express unique aesthetics in the structure and narration of stories without feeling compelled to conform to Western norms and standards for character or plot or theme development.[21] Indian food, families, dress codes, art, cinema, gatherings and so on tend to be loud, lively, vibrant and in-your-face; subtlety and nuance are not descriptors commonly applied to Indian culture. It is unthinkable, then, that literature, especially children's literature, that is authentically connected to its roots, would not reflect, at least in part, its cultural moorings, and claim its heritage fully.

A Reading Map

Before we conclude, here's a quick overview of what the reader will find in the book, which is divided into four sections—Understanding the terrain:

Children's literature in India; The moving landscape: Looking at books; Uneven ground: Issues in children's literature; and As you sow: Using books with children.

The first section, 'Understanding the terrain: Children's literature in India', includes two essays. In the first chapter of the section, storyteller Deepa Kiran describes India's long tradition of oral storytelling, with styles of telling and performance unique to each region. She examines how this tradition has evolved in contemporary times, adapted by innovative storytellers to the needs of modern times by morphing into hybrid forms that include print and digital media. The second chapter of the section is written by publisher Radhika Menon, who founded Tulika Publishers. It focuses on trends in publishing contemporary Indian children's literature, with an emphasis on English language, while touching at a broad level on trends in a couple of other Indian languages. It discusses why children's literature in regional languages has not kept up with the pace of experimentation and change that is seen in English; and also looks at how multilingual publishing has been a strategy that some publishers have adopted to reach a wider cross-section of audiences across the country.

There are four essays in Section 2, 'The moving landscape: Looking at books'. The intent of this section is to look more closely at the evolution, status, issues/themes related to certain salient genres, and illustrations in children's books after the 1990s. The first chapter is written by the author-illustrator Deepa Balsavar, who takes an in-depth look at not just styles and approaches to illustrating for children, but also why they matter, and how the approach has changed from being a side-job to a professional approach. Educator and librarian Thejaswi Shivanand examines fiction, plays and poetry through the lens of morals and humour in the second chapter. His nuanced analysis looks, in particular, at the difference between morals and values in children's books, and asks whether teaching morals actually produces the desired effect on readers. He notes the poverty of attention to children's poetry and drama in contemporary literature, as compared to other flourishing genres. Author and illustrator Niveditha Subramaniam outlines the growth and proliferation of nonfiction in the third chapter, noting moments of key historical shifts, and the influences that have shaped them. She presents readers with a description of 'creative nonfiction', that is, nonfiction that sees itself as of literary worth, not simply

as a method to teach content, but also to explore themes of concern in aesthetically pleasing ways. In the fourth chapter, Devika Rangachari, a noted writer of historical fiction, comments on the status of YA segment in India, still in its nascent stages. She examines the impact of globalisation on the YA genre, presents a succinct synopsis of its development, and explicitly addresses the role of adults as gatekeepers in giving access to certain topics.

The third section, 'Uneven ground: Issues in children's literature', examines a variety of pertinent issues related to children's literature. The first is the issue of representation. Tultul Biswas, director of Eklavya, examines three related questions of representation: Who are the children being represented in the bulk of books being produced today? Who is the presumed audience? Who are the creators? She concludes that the story of children's literature has been largely one of "silences, absences and denials", and the little that is being done today needs to be viewed through that larger lens. The second issue is taken up by Namita Jacob, director of Chetana Trust, and her colleague, Teresa Antony, on how we can make books accessible for children with special needs, an area about which most people have little awareness. They consider access features that bar, or could give entry to children with visual, auditory and intellectual impairments, and outline key principles and features to keep in mind while designing books so that they give access to all children. Translations, the third issue taken up in this section, brings together voices from three translators: Jerry Pinto, Manisha Chaudhry and Arunava Sinha. Across the three brief essays, a variety of themes related to translations are explored: What kinds of choices do translators need to make? What is 'lost' in translation? Is translating for children different from translating for adults? And so on. In the final chapter of this section, V. Geetha, editorial director of Tara Books, and her colleague Divya Vijayakumar, describe innovations in children's literature in the English language, drawing, in particular, on the work done by their publishing house. They describe Tara's efforts to bring indigenous artists into the creation of narratives, experimenting with book formats, and the creation of 'hybrid' cultural products in collaborations with publishers from other countries.

While the first three sections examine children's literature, its evolution, characteristics, genres, issues, and so on, in the fourth section,

'As you sow: Using books with children', we examine how to use literature effectively with children. In their essay, language educators Shailaja Menon, Sreya Rakshit and Karthika Vijayamani discuss pedagogical aspects of using literature with young children, including how to help children engage meaningfully with literature; and how to use literature to help children cultivate literary understandings beyond simple engagement. Sujata Noronha not only runs a library in Goa, her organisation, Bookworm, takes the library to children who cannot access it, by going to local, government schools and conducting library sessions there. On the basis of these experiences, in the second chapter of this section, Sujata reflects on how adults can support, encourage and understand children's responses to literature. By doing so, adults can see how children look at the world, and learn a great deal from them. In the final chapter of this section, Mridula Koshy, founder of The Community Library Project, and one of the founders of the Free Library Movement in India, engaged in a conversation with the editors on the role of libraries in society, the status and functioning of public libraries in India, and on how library spaces can be designed to create equitable access and responsive participation for all.

Interspersed throughout the volume are six brief 'companion pieces' to the longer essays, titled "Voices". These pieces, written in the first person, bring slivers of observations and experiences from practitioners connected in different roles to the domain of children's literature. Based on their personal experiences, Sayoni Basu, Manjula Padmanabhan, Sowmya Rajendran, Sandhya Rao, Keerthi Mukunda and Usha Mukunda, give us glimpses of their roles, respectively, as publisher, illustrator, author, editor, reader and librarian. They describe some of their personal learnings, challenges, and what they hope to see will change for the better.

What This Book is Not

The book does not claim to be comprehensive, nor the final word in children's literature in India; in fact, its omissions are significant, and its examination of issues quite preliminary. As described earlier, with a few exceptions, contributors focus on developments over the past few decades (post the 1990s). Children's literature in India emerged out of rich and diverse oral and performative traditions. When written literature was carved out for children, much significant groundwork for this happened

during the colonial times, and continued until Independence and after. The current boom that we see stands on the shoulders of these early efforts to create a separate genre of books for children. Therefore, the focus of the book on a limited timespan should not be viewed as an ahistorical take, as much as a pragmatic choice to limit the time-period of interest to this book.

A second limitation is that with a few exceptions, contributors have focused on books that have been published in the English language. Initially, our intent was to cover several regional languages within the scope of the themes covered in the book. However, as we went along, we realised we could not develop this into a truly multilingual and multicultural collection as we had initially hoped, due to varied, complex reasons, including our own cultural locations and inability to guide such a volume, as well as the inability of identified individuals to contribute to the book in a timely manner. Wherever contributors have commented on activities in other Indian languages, these languages have been chosen mainly due to the contributors' own familiarity with that language. The audience with access to reading in English represents only about between 2.5 to 4 percent of the population, making this the book's biggest limitation.[22]

A third significant limitation is that the issue of caste has been explored insufficiently in this volume. Caste plays a huge role in access to books and literature, to representation in them, and to inclusion in the community of individuals responsible for the creation and distribution of books. Although touched upon in chapters by Mridula Koshy and Tultul Biswas, this volume has not done justice to a serious examination of this issue.

It should also be noted that the book has deliberately not been positioned as an academic volume in terms of language and presentation style, nor does it presume to present scholarly or research-based contributions. The reason for this is that our intent is to give a broad overview of recent trends and developments in the domain, written by individuals close to the work being done. Hence, the book includes many practitioner-voices. A different kind of volume might be better positioned to analyse and present scholarly commentaries on the landscape.

To reiterate, this book is by no means the final word on the subject of children's literature. As the title suggests, this is only one version of a

story that is well and truly in the thick of action and can only get more engaging and complex as it proceeds. It is in a spirit of understanding and unravelling that we offer it up to our readers.

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Section I

Understanding the Terrain: Children's Literature in India

1

Oral and Performative Traditions

Deepa Kiran

“There were societies that did not have the wheel but there were no societies that did not have oral storytelling.”
Ursula K. Le Guin

I was about 15 minutes into a musical narration of the ‘Dashavatara’, a story from a well-known epic from the Hindu texts, when a little boy seated offstage in the audience shouted out with sincere urgency, “No! That’s not the name of the asura who stole the Earth!” He was clearly correcting my ‘mistake’. When I gently responded by saying that there are different versions of the story and different names for the asura in different versions, he found it rather hard to digest and was quite inconsolable. Not surprising! Ever since he was an infant, he had heard his grandmother tell him the story with a certain asura’s name—so, that had to be the ‘right’ one! This episode serves as a metaphor for shared similarities and differences in oral and performative traditions versus what is available in the written traditions of literature. Declaring the rightness of one version of a story over the other is a purposeless pursuit when it comes to oral and performative traditions because authorial primacy can rarely be established in these forms.

Oral traditions do not require a knowledge of script and are accessible by literate and illiterate alike. Therefore, they enjoy a universality of reception and dissemination compared to written texts. To quote a popular Vietnamese saying, "Words carved in stone fade away. Stories told live forever." In modern times, even with increasing levels of literacy, adults and children across the globe respond with enthusiasm to oral stories. Why do people still enjoy listening to stories when they can read them for themselves? I argue that the act of telling and listening, the act of being spoken to and listened to, has a magic of its own. Oral storytelling, I believe, fills a basic human need for conversation. Brian Sturm, Professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, eloquently expresses the essence of the transaction when he says that storytelling creates a web of trust between the story, the teller and the listener.[1] Multidimensional elements of narration like drama, voice modulation, music, gestures, body language and dance interact to weave a rich and immersive experience for the audience.

India has varied oral and performative traditions. Perhaps you remember watching a Ramleela performance in regions of North India, a Kathakali performance in Kerala, a Tholu Bommalata (shadow puppetry) show in Andhra Pradesh, Mandara Hecchula (with human-sized dolls as narrators) in Warangal in Telangana, Therukootthu and Oppari in Tamil Nadu, Patachitra (stories painted on a scroll) in Midnapore of West Bengal, Hari Katha in the Andhra-Telangana region, Yakshagana in Karnataka, Pandavani in Chhattisgarh, or Dastangoi in Lucknow. These are just a few of the numerous oral and performative traditions that dot the length and breadth of this nation. Some are thriving and alive, like the 800-year-old Yakshagana—a powerful amalgam of oral storytelling with dance, drama, music, elaborate costumes and make-up, and stage effects. The continuing popularity of this style is evident from the fact that performances by Yakshagana troupes are booked for up to five years and, in the case of popular troupes, even up to 10 years in advance. Traditionally, the themes are based on texts such as the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the Bhagavatham and others. Another art form, Pandavani, which comes from 'Pandavon ki kahani' (with themes from the Mahabharata), was popularised and championed around the world by a tenacious woman, Teejan Bai, from Chhattisgarh who, along with her father, fought the system and became a torchbearer within a male-dominated tradition.[2] Similarly,

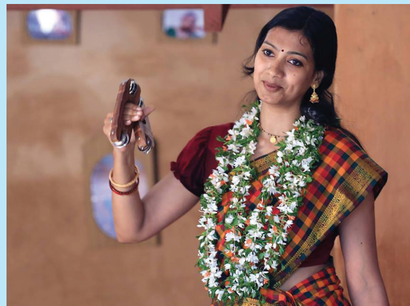

Figure 1.1. India is home to rich storytelling traditions, many of which still survive. Featured here, from left to right and top to bottom, are: Kaavad, Dastangoi, Pandavani, Yakshagana, Harikatha, Ramleela, Patachitra; and Deepa Kiran performing 'Dashavatara' at Our Sacred Spaces, Hyderabad, 2014.

Kaavad is another unique storytelling art form from Rajasthan which uses specially created wooden boxes, resembling miniature cupboards and painted with images of gods and goddesses, to narrate stories from the epics. The storyteller opens the doors of these travelling shrines to reveal several panels and takes the audience through the episodes painted on each of them. In the eastern part of the country, Mamoni Chitrakar and other Patachitra artists will charm you with their hand-painted scrolls that they slowly keep rolling open as they sing the stories of gods and goddesses. A much-loved story in this tradition is of the wedding of fishes where the scroll cleverly opens up, finally revealing the mouth of the big fish which swallows up the rest of the innocent fishes in the wedding celebrations.

The transmission of oral information for trade, travel, and catching up on local news gave rise to many different kinds of bardic traditions. Special days would be ceremonially allotted for narrations from the Jati Puranas. These were stories belonging to specific communities told by bards from their own communities. So, weavers and potters, for example, would have stories relating to the origin of their community and their beliefs. Sthala Puranas referred to stories about places of value such as a place of worship, a palace, a fort, and so on. A beggar was also a bard whose job it was to pass on the stories of the neighbourhood from one home to another. As he walked down the streets, he updated the townsfolk of the latest happenings. Rumour and news both travelled on trade routes with bards and poets.

Given the existence and significance of these diverse oral and performative traditions, a book on children's literature in India would be incomplete without considering what they have to offer to the conversation. Expositions on oral and performative traditions are often not accessible in print form. Yet, it seems to be worthwhile to pause and examine these traditions in print. "Why do we need a mirror to see the blister on our hands?" asked the folklorist A.K. Ramanujan, citing a Kannada proverb.[3] His response to this rhetorical question was: "…we seem to need (the mirror), for we believe in the mirror of writing or even better, the mirror of print." This chapter is an attempt to 'mirror' and reflect critically on oral and performative traditions through writing and print. However, the more I learn, the more I understand the near impossibility of the quest to put together, with proof, the history and trajectory of the oral

and performative traditions of India in the context of children's literature. Therefore, rather than attempt an ambitious or comprehensive project, in this chapter, I examine the following themes that can be explored in the context of the Indian subcontinent—differences between the nature of oral and written performative traditions, hybridisation and transformations in form, style and content, and the significance of oral literature in highly literate societies. I end by reflecting on where we are today in terms of what we have accomplished and the road ahead. I share my learnings and insights, both as someone raised in the subcontinent and as a storyteller. I use an oral style of narration in this chapter to mirror my theme.

Oral Versus Written Traditions

Once upon a time, a philosopher asked a carpenter about a knife which he kept with him very carefully: "Is this knife a family heirloom?" The carpenter replied, "Indeed it is. This knife has been handed down in the family over a long period of time. Sometimes the blade has been changed and sometimes the handle—but it is the same knife!" This is an apt analogy for oral traditions and the nature of their transmission—which, once again, I borrow from A.K. Ramanujan.[4] My father heard stories from his father, but what he told me was his version of them. I heard these stories from my father and passed them on to my sons and nieces, but what they will tell will be their own versions—the same story and yet, not the same. We shall return repeatedly to the take-off point of memory: mine and yours. It is nearly impossible to speak of oral traditions without speaking of memory, since before writing came into existence, which is fairly recent, all across the world, human beings transmitted their wisdom and learning, their culture and their beliefs largely through oral, visual and performative traditions. The stories had to be transmitted through memorisation and personalisation.

Stories, Oral Transmission and Memory

In India, the moukhika parampara or oral tradition has been highly valued. Be it the teaching of akshara (the alphabet), multiplication tables, long running chapters, or verses from the Vedas and epics, children were commonly taught these through listen-and-repeat oral methods in schools: sravanam. This was also true outside of schools, where young children

learned the stories and songs of their communities through oral and performative traditions. Local communities commonly shared (and some still continue to share) their 'sky stories' or origin stories related to the 'sky' (astronomical objects and occurrences), be it the inhabitants of Ladakh, the Gonds of Adilabad, or various other cultural groups. Children would be introduced to the communities' knowledge of astronomy, origin of life and world views through these oral narratives. Using the framework of a story offered better potential for engaging with the experience, supported easier memorisation and ensured efficient recall. Were these stories and songs exclusively for children? We could conclude that perhaps they were not. There was, and continues to be, mixed-age audiences for oral and performative literature, as there is for most folk traditions.

Of course, there are certain categories of oral literature that specifically reflect the world of children—for example, rhymes, lullabies, game songs, medicine songs, bathing songs, feeding songs, cradle songs, massage songs and others related to specific themes and occasions. Perhaps you remember the games you played as a child where you ran around, aimed and shot at marbles with your thumb and index finger, or when two friends held hands and made an overbridge for the others to pass under. There was often an oral chant that accompanied these movements. You are probably nodding your head while reading these words and many more such memories may be flooding in. At the same time, you could be struggling with recalling the actual words that accompanied these chants! "What comes after Akkad bakkad bambe bo…?" You are racking your brains… or if lucky, you are rolling off the lines, "Assi nabbe, poore sau!" I remember that, when I was a child, my father would sit on a chair and put me stomach-down on his shin bones; there I would be, looking up at him. He would hold my hands while swinging his legs and sing,

Saanjadamma saanjaaddu
Kaddaikku pollaam saannjaaddu
Mittai vaangallam saanjaaddu
Meduvaithingallam saanjaaddu

A loose translation from Tamil would be,

Swing along dear, swing along.
Let's go to the market, swing along.

Let's buy some sweetmeats, swing along.
Let's eat them slowly, swing along.

I cannot pen these lines without simultaneously singing them in my head. The lyrics would be half-forgotten but would slowly seep back in as I watched Appa play the same game with my niece. Today, there is something else I remember as I write this—swinging my little sons and singing to them, "*Saanjaaddamma saanjaddu*…". That experience too is now a part of my memory of this song. In all these chants, the tone, voice, eye contact, play, actions, movement and the group recitation in a sing-song manner are as important as or even more important than what is actually being said or recited or sung. Nagaraj Paturi, a folklore studies expert, mentions that there is a plethora of categories of children's play-time game-songs and recitations in Kannada, Telugu and Tamil—teasing songs, blindfold songs, marble throwing songs, and songs accompanied by clapping in patterns while standing in a circle.[5] A popular one in the Telugu language is:

Chemma chekka charadesi mogga
attlu poyanga araginchanga
Mutyalu chemma chekka mugguleyanga
Ratnala chemma chekka ranguleyanga
Pagadala chemma chekka pandireyanga
Panditlo ammayi pelli cheyanga.
Chemma chekka charadesi mogga
attlu poyanga araginchanga

Its English translation is,

Pretty pretty flowers
Chemma chekka
Let's eat dosas
Chemma chekka
Kolam patterns
Chemma chekka
Shine like jewels
Chemma chekka
Let's go see them
Chemma chekka[6]

Other categories of oral children's literature consist of jokes, idioms and proverbs. Paturi argues from the lens of aesthetics theory that these lend beauty to speech and infuse it with a dynamism that compels one to imagine the pictures.[7] The clever metaphors create instant connections for children—they draw their attention and inspire them to try them out—like trying on a new dress! I am entirely inclined to agree. I remember that when I was out in the park with my children one evening, a group of 7-to-10-year-olds were playing and one of them fell down near a sharp stone about two feet away. One child pointed to the stone and said, "Baal-baal bach gaye", a Hindi idiom which, loosely translated, means 'saved by a hair's breadth'. The rest of the children soon caught on and the entire group of children was running around shouting loudly, "Baal-baal bach gaye, baal-baal bach gaye", for the next few minutes. Logically speaking, the stone was quite far away and the use of the idiom was absolutely unnecessary—but what do children care! One of them must have recently learnt the idiom and was excited to try it out. He had managed to use it in a fairly appropriate context, and dissemination was instant and 'disruptive' (to use a trending term!). Thus, the oral transmission of stories, songs and rhymes was embedded in actions and activities that turned them into 'lived experiences' for the participants. When the song or story is evoked, emotions and memories are triggered as much as, or even more than the precise words. The words could change as they travelled from body to body—thus, different versions of the same story or song would emerge, with no resort to referring back to the 'correct' or 'original' version. The very words 'version' and 'rendition' associated with these traditions show their interpretability, adaptability and malleability by different tellers.

Multi-age Audiences

One can definitely observe in the literature that was meant to be transmitted to and through the children, that the composers took heed of their purpose, of the audience level and of the artistic possibilities in poetry, rhythm, voice, speech and musicality. Kapil Kapoor writes, "The Indian conception of language differs…from the western. Language is speech, not writing (script)…".[8] Our oral literature and its performative aspects indicate awareness that knowledge was passed on through speech and lived on through the children, through folklore, long after the adults were gone.

The adult composer of folklore—regardless of whether she/he was an oral storyteller, bard, poet or singer—often kept in mind three levels of audience: the adhamadhikari who came purely for entertainment; the madhyamadhikari who came for entertainment, but believed there were deeper insights which they could occasionally catch; and the uttamadhikari who came not only for the entertainment, but also for deeper insights. This categorisation had no judgement attached to it—it was not based on the intelligence or age of the listener, but on their 'absorption potential' at a given point in life. So, the compositions, while delving into intellectual and philosophical truths, would also be entertaining and engaging from the purely performative aspects. Some of the elements that aided in achieving this aim included choice of words, poetry, rhyme, rhythm and metre, and onomatopoeia. I choose here as an example, these lines from the Ramayana which I heard as a child that describes Hanuman burning Lanka:

Lapata karaal jwaal jaal maal
Dahundushi dhoom
Akulane pahichaane kaun kahire.
Paani ko
Lalaat bilalaat kare
Paat jhaat maayi ghaat re

A simple translation could be: *It appears as if sparks are falling from the sky. The whole place is on flames, the heat is unbearable and everyone is crying for water. The demons are scared of the unmatched power of the monkey. They are running helter-skelter amidst the fire and reaching out to their family members and asking them to escape and save themselves.*

This is reproduced completely from my memory. As discussed earlier, it is not helpful to debate the correctness of this reproduction. What is important is the memory and the lived experience of it, which is still alive in me and has been travelling further through me in my musical renditions of this epic. One cannot help but notice the musicality in the words, the beauty of the rhyme and metre, and the onomatopoeia infusing energy to this grand scene! Imagine the teller reciting this: the words, the tone and the speech all coming together and taking the audience of children and grown-ups alike through the burning of a mighty city. The music, make-up, costumes, stage set-up, chorus and drama would enrich

the atmosphere. In the Natya Shastra, the classic text on dramaturgy, the term 'ekapatra abhinaya' is used to denote the single actor who has to assume many roles—including that of the 'sutradhaar', the narrator. Thus, oral literature and its performance aptly complement each other.

As children, perhaps we connect with a story due to the sheer joy of the dramatic telling. As we grow up and return to the same story, each time its performance is in alignment with our now-different sensibilities. "Ah! What a clever play of words", one might think at a certain point in one's life. Then, perhaps, on returning to it at a different point, deeper meanings begin to unravel themselves. The saint-poet from 16th–17th century, Tulsidas, wrote his version of the Ramayana, the *Ramcharitmanas*, in a simple, lyrical style in Brij Bhasha, a common spoken language of the time, so that a larger audience (consisting of both adults and children) could unravel the philosophical truths of Vedanta. The child and the adult both mattered in oral storytelling; it was important to experience the joy of participating through listening, as well as to understand the deeper layers of meaning that the words pointed to. These differential layers of possible participation meant that both children and adults could simultaneously be a part of the experience. The child, after all, is eventually the vehicle for the intergenerational dissemination of the story!

Hybridisation and Transformations

While children's literature travelled from region to region through formal performances that addressed both children and grown-ups simultaneously (as discussed earlier), intergenerational transfer of stories also occurred within informal contexts of the child's life such as dinner time, bedtime and bath time. A major change created by modernity is that children now spend a large part of their lives in formal education systems or schools. Pioneers such as Gijubhai Badheka from Gujarat (lovingly called 'Mooche waali Mummy', or 'Mother with a Moustache') recognized that children, even in pre-Independent India, no longer had enough family time to listen to and imbibe the oral tradition. To counteract this, they searched for and brought back oral stories and songs into the formal education system—both in print and oral forms. Badheka recognised that the cultural scenario was evolving in a manner that separated children from adults in terms of accessibility and popular imagination, and that with these changes came

the need for oral forms to cater especially to child audiences. Further, the breakdown of extended families and the unavailability of elders for extended storytelling sessions has necessitated that formal educational contexts share the responsibility for telling stories to children.

Building on the legacy of pioneers like Badheka, contemporary storytellers in India have felt the need to experiment, in order to reach children immersed in modern education systems influenced by global worldviews (with digital technology at their fingertips). Today, storytellers are attempting to work with both sustaining and reviving regional languages as well as employing English in their storytelling performances. In this context, we find a blending of the old and new forms to specially reach the multimedia-inundated, global exposure-filled lives of urban, middle-class India. In these new, hybridised forms, there is the comfort coming from that which is old, familiar and predictable; at the same time, there is the thrill that comes with the new, unfamiliar and surprising. A fine balance between these two goes a long way in taking children and adults along in an immersive experience of oral performance.

In the sections that follow, I attempt to briefly describe a few of the hybridisations and transformations of traditional forms that are being experimented with.

Examples of Hybrid Forms

The musician-storytellers of Western India, the Manganiyars, have kept alive a unique tradition that is a few hundred years old. It was a huge learning experience for me during the Bhubaneswar Festival of Storytelling (BhuFeSto 2018)—researching, collaborating and performing with the troupe from Rajasthan as they sang their story songs of valour and grace while I narrated stories of the history of the Manganiyars, to 'edutain' the children. Such hybridisation attempts are flourishing today.

Sajeesh Pulavar, a mechanical engineer by profession, belongs to the 13th generation of a 700-year-old tradition of shadow puppetry in Kerala called Tholpavakoothu, a declining art form. To rejuvenate this tradition, Sajeesh not only dared to replace the traditional lamps with electric ones in the performance but also brought in robots to operate the leather puppets. His team managed to absolutely charm the audience with this 'new' version of an old art form! Puppeteer Padmini Rangarajan of Sphoorthi

Theatre for Educational Puppetry, Art and Craft (STEPARC, Hyderabad) has also done much work with hybridisation of traditional puppetry arts for contemporary children, including running a magazine on this theme.

Sadly, many oral and performative forms are dying or are struggling to survive. An example of a struggling form is Tholu Bommalata which had social-activist artists like Madhavi Latha involved in its revival efforts, with an intent to use it in social and cultural education. At the Vizag Junior Literature Festival (VJLF) in 2018, I was able to work on an exciting project of collaborative attempt at revival of this art form. Sriramulu, an expert in Tholu Bommalata, who hailed from a family traditionally involved in this, became the bridge between his work, his team and me. Along with Sriramulu, I researched the journey of the art form, the artists, some of their popular narratives and the challenges they face today. "Children today do not want to watch our performances. It is only cartoons and television for them," he feels. The VJLF created and organised an opportunity for our trust, the Story Arts Foundation, and Sriramulu's team to come together for a unique bilingual experiment. While Sriramulu and team performed the scene from the Ramayana of Hanuman crossing the ocean, I wove in stories of the art form, of the artists and of the representation. It was precious to see the audience of about 500–600, comprising mostly children and their parents and grandparents, give a standing ovation to the team and queue up beside the stage later to congratulate them and to obtain their business cards. However, despite the efforts at revival and reimagination, the truth of the matter is that this is a dying art form.

Taking inspiration from the Oppaari tradition of Tamil Nadu, in which oral storytellers narrate stories and sing songs of the deceased at funerals, an Indian rapper, singer and songwriter, Arivarasu Kalainesan (popularly known as Arivu), wrote and sang *Enjoy Enjaami* along with singer Dhee in 2022. It was a Tamil song which went viral within hours of its release and is being listened to by youth in India and around the world. This is a successful attempt in pop culture where the bringing together of a traditional form and a contemporary style of music—rap—has created a new hybrid form in oral storytelling-songwriting. Arivu also built in elements from his family history, of being slaves in plantations, thus powerfully employing traditional elements of oral storytelling within a modern form to give a voice for the less-heard narratives.

Not too long ago, an independent music album brought to Indian audiences a song, 'Ek rahen eer, ek rahen beer', sung by actor Amitabh Bachchan. This was initially mistaken by the media to be rap (the closest reference for the young today); later, the makers clarified that it was based on an oral narration style from Chhattisgarh. Strictly speaking, the form itself was not hybridised. However, its reception in the minds of urban youth was based on their hybridised subjectivities; thus, being received as rap perhaps contributed to its success. I was also lucky to witness an interesting experiment with oral storytelling in Delhi in 2019—this was a Dastangoi performance in Urdu of the book *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, originally written in English by Lewis Carroll. The audience—adults and children alike—was riveted to the performance! Thus, not only are Indian art forms being westernised, but stories that have originated in the West are also being indigenised within our oral storytelling frameworks.

Dissemination of Hybrid Forms: The Role of Individuals, Conferences, Festivals and Networks

So many individuals and institutions have been influential in revitalising oral traditions by making them relevant to contemporary audiences. I mention a few here, although this is by no means a comprehensive listing! Chennai-based Jeeva Raghunath has popularised stories from the oral traditions of Tamil language, written books and performed on television as well. Bengaluru-based Geeta Ramanujam of Kathalaya has performed and trained others widely. Eric Miller, the Director of World Storytelling Institute in Chennai, has grown the valuable Chennai Storytelling Festival for over a decade. Lavanya Prasad (Bengaluru) researches and performs as different characters for her performances based on traditional art forms. Mumbai-based Lopamudra Mohanty's IBAK (Indian Bhasha Art Architecture and Kahani) points the needle to narrations and stories in the mother tongue. Mumbai-based Sarita Nair's project—Heritage Stories and Performing Arts—curates stories from Indian history. Ramendra Kumar (Bengaluru), the globally renowned storyteller and author for children, has had his books translated into many Indian languages, including the tribal Santhali language. I recently launched an app for story-based learning, *Deepa's Storycation*. Usha Venkatraman (Mumbai), Lavanya

Srinivas Gade (Chennai), (Bangalore), Sherin Mathews (Mumbai), Meera Bharat (Bangalore), Surya Swapna (Indonesia), Rituparna Ghosh (New Delhi), and Priyanka Chatterjee (Kolkata) are also among important contemporary names.

These efforts are made not only through schools (or popular media), but also through conferences, festivals, and other such events. For example, a few years ago, FLAME University, Pune, organised an international conference, 'Shabd Aur Sangeet—Unravelling Song-Texts in the Indian Situation', curated by the renowned classical musician, Shubha Mudgal. Another recent attempt was the 'Conference on Indigenous Storytelling Traditions of India' organised in 2022 by INDICA, a non-government organisation (I served as the co-curator of this conference along with Nagaraj Paturi and Shivakumar G.V.)[9]. In March 2024, a Meta-Retreat was organised by INDICA and Story Arts Foundation where practitioners of storytelling and scholars came together to reflect on the field of oral traditions: past, present and future, and reimagined the journey ahead. The last decade has seen a mushrooming of children's storytelling and literature festivals across India, such as Bookaroo and Katha in Delhi; Chennai Storytelling Festival and Under the Aalamaram in Chennai; Neev Literature Festival and KathaVana in Bengaluru; Damadikiya and Zest-a-Story of HYSTA at the Hyderabad Literature Festival in Hyderabad, and STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) Storytelling Festival in Mumbai. Similar festivals have also sprung up in other cities such as Bhubaneswar, Chandigarh, Raipur, Vizag, Cochin, and more! Urban storytellers from India are doing their share in creating and participating in these developments. Networks of urban storytellers include the Indian Storyteller's Network, Hyderabad Storytellers' Association (HYSTA), Mumbai Storytellers' Society (MSS), Bangalore Storytelling Society (BSS), Delhi Storytellers' Tribe (DST) and many others.

Contemporary storytellers are telling in multiple genres and styles of stories across a spectrum of contexts (entertainment, education, self-development, healing and professional development) and situated in a range of settings (schools, libraries, art centres, cultural events, counselling centres and corporate). They are bringing back old oral traditions of India in a contemporary packaging that holds universal appeal. It is heartening to see many sincere endeavours across India by traditional and

contemporary professional storytellers to return to and celebrate the oral traditions, culture and languages of this subcontinent.

Hybridisation into Print Forms

Any conversation on hybridisation attempts would be incomplete without considering the movement of the oral art-forms into print. The much-loved *Chandamama* magazine came into print in 1947 with stories and illustrations that served to capture and share, as closely as possible, the oral literature and the experience of telling and listening. It was published in many Indian languages. In the decades that followed, many other children's journals and magazines attempted this revival as well—for example, *Bal Bharati, Target, Tamasha, Chacha Chaudhary,* and of course Uncle Pai's *Tinkle* and *Amar Chitra Katha* series. Narrative lyrical literature is a genre that was explored by popular writers such as Balashouri Reddy and Subbarayan in Telugu. Even though they produced the work for written publication, the larger agenda was to write in a style that was close to an oral experience so that it would continue to travel orally.

As the publishing industry for children's literature in India has expanded in recent decades, it has also witnessed an explosion of books that refer back to oral storytelling traditions—either the story itself is adapted from oral forms or the illustrations are inspired by Patachitra, Gond, Warli and other visual storytelling or performative art forms. Today, many publishers have recognised the importance of oral storytelling for children and this renewed interest is reflected in the books they publish. A favourite example of oral literature in print is *Oluguti Toluguti* (Radhika Menon, Sandhya Rao & Kshitiz Sharma) which my sons and I return to time and again! This multilingual book is a laudable effort in collecting and collating popular children's rhymes from across India. There are rhymes in over 23 languages and the highlight is that each rhyme is presented in three forms—in the original script, transliterated into English, and translated into English. The illustrations that take inspiration from the regional traditions bring the rhymes alive. It should be noted that in this multimedia-inundated world, the paths of oral forms criss-cross with those of print, audio, and visual, each one becoming a medium for transmission. Thus, from oral to print and from print back to oral, the means of transmission switches between shapes and forms.

Figure 1.2. Poems must be recited to be remembered: This page from the poetry collection, *Oluguti Toluguti,* features a popular Marathi rhyme in English translation, the original, and in romanised Marathi.

Technology and Audiovisual Media

Whether realistic or steeped in fantasy, oral storytelling today is finding itself in a strange love-hate relationship with technology and audiovisual media. On the one hand, these aid the transmission of oral stories; on the other, the advent of media has also contributed to its decline! Daily routines of listening to storytelling practices within the home and community saw a slow death after media seeped into our lives. The 1979 song, 'Video killed the radio star' by the British group, the Buggles, could well be changed to, 'Radio killed the storytelling star'. Perhaps, 'killed' is a strong word in this context and 'changed' would be more appropriate. I have childhood memories of lapping up exquisitely curated, produced and

delivered programmes by All India Radio and Doordarshan (both owned by the Government of India) that took inspiration from oral performance styles but played around with content and presentation to engage with contemporary audiences. For example, some popular television series include *Vikram aur Betaal, Chandrakanta, Malgudi Days, Jungle Book,* and so on. And who can forget Satyajit Ray's 1969 film, *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne* emulating closely in the visual medium, the oral forms of children's literature? Likewise, the Assamese film, *Kothar Nadi* is a lyrical visual of folk tales from Assam.

During the last couple of decades, the Children's Film Society of India (CFSI) has made an effort towards the revival of oral literature through series such as *Krish Tish* and *Balti Boy*. These animation series are narrations of stories from folklore from different regions of India with each story being narrated with graphic images inspired by a specific storytelling tradition of that region (eg, Tholu Bommalatta from erstwhile Andhra Pradesh or miniature paintings from Rajasthan). For me, as a performing artist and art-based educator who consciously seeks to invite the young minds to engage with and joyfully experience our oral literature and performative styles, this series from CFSI, though raising concerns with its accented-Hindi narration, is still a laudable effort. *Nani ki Kahani* is another popular audio story source by a grandmother from India who is sharing stories she heard with the world, through WhatsApp.

The hybridisation discussion would be incomplete without a mention of the pandemic, when, like the rest of the world, Indian storytellers and audience adapted to the replacement of raw and immediate face-to-face human interactions with distanced, online interactions. The adaptation has been swift and impressive and, in fact, has brought with it precious opportunities for many Indian storytellers to participate on international platforms. Tech-savvy and digitally comfortable Indian storytellers have thus got onto international circuits with a fair amount of ease and grace. However, a face-to-face interaction, with its magic of physical presence, cannot be completely substituted with an online interaction.

To Sanitise or Not to Sanitise?

I started this chapter by pointing out that authorial primacy cannot be easily established in traditions of folklore. Storytellers can, and often do,

modify content to suit the current telling. One of my favourite anecdotes to illustrate this point relates to the story, *Mohini and the Demon* (Shanta Rameshwar Rao & Pranab Chakravarti). I love telling this story, which is adapted from the Puranas. In the story, Lord Siva gives a boon to a demon and later runs to Vishnu to be rescued from the very same demon. Vishnu takes the form of Mohini, tricks the demon and kills him. I had been narrating this story for years before it underwent a major revision at the Kala Ghoda Festival in Mumbai a few years ago, where, at the end of the narration, I stopped to ask the audience what they felt about the story. One little girl said, "Oh! The girl killed the demon. I thought she would become friends with him!" Her innocent response set me thinking and I finally changed the power of the demon—I tweaked his boon. In my revised version of the story, the demon could not kill people when he put his hand on their head, but he could make them laugh uncontrollably until they were tired. Then, he would eat them up. In this version of the story, the girl tricks him into putting his hand on his own head and tires him out completely by giggling. Then, instead of doing any harm to him, she has a conversation with him about why he eats up her people. She realises the problem is his hunger and so she promises that her people will feed him well from the village harvest. The demon, in turn, promises never to eat the village folk and to protect them as well. They all become friends and live happily ever after. I have performed the modified version of the story often and have also recorded an audio version of it which is travelling through YouTube and podcasting platforms, being shared and narrated by many more adults and children in its new avatar as *Mohini and Ajivika*.

While I consciously took out certain elements of gore and horror in my version of the story, this was not an intentional sanitisation of content, but a spontaneous response to a young child's desire to hear a different kind of ending. Typically, folk literature is not very sanitised in content and as storytellers, we have been questioned or accused when we have unapologetically left gore and horror unchanged in the narration. A parent once sent me an email which said, "Deepa, we are fans of your storytelling. However, I had to write to you to share that my daughter was so scared to go to the bathroom last night as she remembered the horror story that you most unexpectedly narrated at the festival, earlier in the evening." Cathy Spagnoli, the renowned storyteller and researcher, gently and wisely addresses this issue in her book *The World of Indian Stories*

where she states that both schools of thought will continue to exist—one which advises storytellers to "tell the stories of the world as it really is… with blood and gore, crooks and unfairness" and another that insists that we "be gentle with the child and sanitise the stories."[10] The former is easily seen historically in folk narratives from across the globe—be it *Grimms' Tales* from Europe, the *Panchatantra* from India, or tales from varied African and American traditions. We had an undergraduate participant once share a story he had heard from his grandfather when he was 10 years old. The narrative kept us on the edges of our seats with twists and turns in the plot—including alcoholism, incest, extramarital affairs and other (what would be considered 'adult') themes unabashedly enmeshed. However, in recent times, it is more common to insist on heavy sanitisation of taboo content from storytelling. It seems possible that concerns with sanitisation are connected with the sharpening of boundaries between the worlds of children and adults. While we might choose to take sides, both schools of thought shall continue to exist on what to include in children's literature.

Storytelling in India: Strengths, Challenges, and Needs

Shekhar Kapoor, the international film maker, once remarked that "India is a land of stories. You are compelled to look, and everywhere you look, there is a story." There is a saying about India that with every 100 kilometres of moving across this country, the flora, fauna, food, clothing, language, habitat and customs change. This diversity offers multiple opportunities for explorations and renewals of older forms—be they through multilingual books or via Netflix series based on our folk traditions. In this chapter, I have attempted to trace both the decline of certain traditions as well as efforts to rejuvenate and reinvent certain traditions. Having looked back at the past in the journey of storytelling, it is interesting to pause and reflect on where we are today.

I remember a time, not too long ago, when I used to be asked, "Deepa, why don't you tell *Cinderella* or *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs?* Why do you tell Tenali Ramakrishna stories? And who tells *Dashavatara* in English anyways?" Back then, I had to justify my need to share stories from my land, in my land and in the English language! However, over the past decade, sensibilities have slowly changed amongst the urban middle classes. On the one hand, there is more support for storytelling in general,

and for returning to our roots; on the other hand, there is an understanding of why some of these need to be told using the English language which is already the 'mother tongue', so to speak, for a certain class of children. This change has come about as parents and educational institutions have slowly begun to consider and get curious about what their child is missing out on when they don't get to hear stories, as well as the value of listening to stories in their mother tongues or in other Indian languages. The absence of traditional oral storytellers, and even of grandparents in many contemporary urban children's experiences, has created a vacuum that is slowly being experienced as a need amongst parents.

There is, therefore, an openness and receptivity today from audiences, educational institutions, art and culture festivals, and the corporate world, that is very encouraging. Many institutions, government and private, have focused on training their teachers in storytelling skills and its pedagogical possibilities. I have personally reached over 80,000 teachers through workshops. Storytellers in India are also working with schools as Storytellers-in-Residence. In an earlier section, I had given the example of Sajeesh Pulavar rejuvenating the form of Tholpavakoothu using electric bulbs and robots. One of our strengths is that we are able to draw upon our culture and tradition, while simultaneously having a strong base in modern science and technology and in the international link language of English, to renew these traditions. The term 'Puranam' embodies within it this very idea—'Pura', the ancient, and 'Navam', that which is ever nascent.

The modern storytelling experiences being recreated are, of course, not substitutes for the feeding songs or songs sung while bathing the child, that were traditionally sung by parents or grandparents. However, these experiences could hope to:

1. offer vicarious experiences of traditions within modern community settings;
2. trigger memories of such experiences amongst the adults who had experienced them as children;
3. create a ripple effect where children and parents return home 'infected' with curiosity and love for stories and oral performances; and
4. offer content and training for those interested in taking it up as a more serious pursuit.

The journey ahead is long and arduous, yet is totally worth the effort. Given the hand-in-glove relationship between storytelling and learning, and being an educator myself, I have mixed feelings regarding where we are today. I am thrilled and yet a little concerned with the recent faith placed in the storyteller-educator as an authority. Shifting from times when storytellers had to justify telling stories, today, we are invited as highly respected individuals to schools and other educational forums. It is clear that we do not have all the answers and that we are not always 'right'. I urge storytellers and those we collaborate with to exercise caution and restraint when we are placed in such positions.

Let me elaborate. A couple of new and popular notions that link storytelling with education need to be understood and handled with care. They are the twin ideas of 'link storytelling with the curriculum' and 'anything can be taught through stories'. I believe these ideas are like double-edged swords: they can be helpful but are also dangerous and naïve, if implemented without right questioning and context. Storytelling can certainly be linked to the curriculum at times and it can be employed to teach certain subjects and concepts. However, as a science graduate who works with science and maths-based storytelling, I find myself worried about the academic rigour or rather the lack of it when storytellers engage with concept-based storytelling. It is critical to collaborate with the right subject matter experts and science communicators for such initiatives. So, while storytelling can be a wonderful pedagogical tool, I urge storytellers working in education to question and reflect on the validity of the expectation that all concepts can be taught through stories.

Conclusion

I remember a favourite story that my father would often narrate. It is the story of a minister who would say, "Yellaam Nanmaikku" (Everything is for the good), no matter what happened. Once, in anger, the King ordered his minister to be jailed for making this statement after the King got injured in an accident. The minister responded to even this order with, "Yellaam Nanmaikku"! The next day, the King got injured and was lost in the jungle while on a hunt and he was captured by the people living there. Even though they intended to sacrifice him, they released him when they saw his injury because they needed an uninjured human for their sacrifice. On his way

back, the King realised that the injury which he had complained about had saved him. The phrase 'Yellaam Nanmaikku' flashed through his mind. On his return, he promptly released the minister and said, "I am sorry; I see your point about my injury now, but what good came about by your being in jail?" The minister promptly pointed out that had he not been in the jail, he would have accompanied the King (as was customary); being injury free, he might have been offered as the sacrifice by now! Therefore, "Yellaam Nanmaikku!"

A couple of years ago, as I sat crying after receiving another rejection for a PhD admission, my younger son sat beside me, patted my head, and said softly, "Yellaam Nanmaikku, Ma." Even with that heavy heart, I couldn't help smiling—not only for what he shared but also for how the story had travelled from my father to me, from me to my son, and from my son back to me, in a manner I had least expected and at a time when I most needed to hear it!

The handle will change and the blade will change, but the knife gets passed on from generation to generation.

Notes and References

1. Brian Sturm, *Storytelling Theory and Practice*, UNC Chapel Hill, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UFC-URW6wkU.
2. Teejan Bai fell in love with the artform of Pandavani while watching her paternal grandfather perform. She wanted to learn it too. But no woman from her tribal community in central India had ever performed this art form and she was immediately cast out of the community. She left her husband and home, set up a little hut outside the village that shunned her, and started performing. People were drawn to her electric presence and unique booming voice. Soon her fame grew and she was able to receive formal training. She went on to travel and enchant audiences across the world with this oral tradition of India, appealing to the young and old alike. For her immense contribution to Pandavani, she has been honoured with numerous prestigious awards such as Padma Shri, Padma Bhushan, Sangeet Natak Academy Award, M. S. Subbalaxmi Centenary Award, Padma Vibhushan and Fukuoka Prize.
3. A.K. Ramanujan, "Who Needs Folklore? The Relevance of Oral Traditions to South Asian Studies," lecture delivered at University of Hawaii, Honolulu, 3 March, 1988, https://

scholarspace.manoa.hawaii.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/0686be16-d28a-4d2a-b3d1-b839becc6243/content.
4. A.K. Ramanujan, ibid.
5. Nagraj Paturi, "Folktale transmission through Children's magazine: a debate in Orality and Literarcy" paper presented at annual conference of FOSSILS, Department of Telugu Sri Venkateswara University, Tripuati, 1997, https://www.academia.edu/8614297/Folktale_transmission_through_Children_s_magazines_a_debate_in_Orality_and_Literacy_annual_conference_of_FOSSILS_Department_of_Telugu_Sri_Venkateswara_University_Tirupati_1997.
6. From the book *Oluguti Toluguti*, edited by Radhika Menon and Sandhya Rao, illustrated by Kshitiz Sharma, published by Tulika Publishers, New Delhi, 2011.
7. Nagraj Paturi, op cit.
8. Kapil Kapoor, "Theory and practice of Language Teaching in India," *Language and Language Teaching*, vol 1, no 2, 2012, p 43-47, https://publications.azimpremjiuniversity.edu.in/1046/1/Theory%20and%20Practice%20of%20Language%20Teaching%20in%20India.pdf
9. Nagaraj Paturi is a scholar of Indian culture and folk tradition. He has served as the Senior Professor of Cultural Studies FLAME School of Communication and FLAME School of Liberal Education and is a former Visiting faculty, University of Chicago, US. Shivakumar GV is an IT professional with interest in Indian culture.
10. Cathy Spagnoli, *The World of Indian Stories*, Tulika Publishers, New Delhi, 2003.

Additional Resources to Explore Oral Storytelling Traditions of India

1. Patachitra, Bengal (Fish Wedding Story):
   https://artsandculture.google.com/story/ZAWBnNOlbmMb8A
   https://baromarket.in/collections/laltu-chitrakar/products/copy-of-fish-pond
2. Kaavad, Rajasthan:
   https://twitter.com/ShefVaidya/status/1468894046202392578
3. Tholu Bommalaataa (Leather Puppetry), Andhra Pradesh and Telangana:
   https://www.thehansindia.com/business/the-vanishing-art-of-leather-puppetry-in-andhra-pradesh-745722
4. Koodiyaattam (UNESCO Heritage Performing Art Form), Kerala:
   https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Koodiyattam#/media/File:Koodiyattam_Framed_001.jpg
5. Dastangoi (Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*):
   https://indianexpress.com/article/lifestyle/art-and-culture/salman-rushdie-haroun-and-the-sea-of-stories-dastangoi-adaptation-independence-day-6554863/

Children's Books Cited

1. Sandhya Rao, Radhika Menon and Kshitiz Sharma (illus), *Oluguti Toluguti: Indian Rhymes to Read and Recite*, Tulika Publishers, Chennai, 2011.
2. Shanta Rameshwar Rao and Pranab Chakravarti (illus), *Mohini and the Demon*, National Book Trust, New Delhi, 1990.