

Madhuri Purandare

An interview by Anshumala Gupta

Q1: What inspired you to become a children's writer?

Ans 1: 25-30 years back, in Vanasthali, we started working for Bawaldis (preschool) in villages where formal schooling posed a lot of problems for village children with a high drop out. We had serious paucity of trained teachers for these Bawaldis because rural women could not go for the six month's training in urban centers and urban women would not come and work in villages for 75-100 rupees. So we started on our own training courses for the women in villages which involved a lot of convincing for the girls' parents and the girls themselves. Even bringing children to preschool centers was hard.

When we started working with these girls, we realized that we had to enhance the sensibilities of these village girls working in the midst of village politics, cast conflicts etc. and having little education or exposure to the outside world or to reading. Besides, it was important to develop their self respect as well as respect in society as conscious citizens who are responsible for shaping the future generation. Hence we started an 8 page bimonthly newsletter with a variety of subjects, which was also a platform for sharing their experiences, difficulties and innovations. I started editing that newspaper. Soon we realized that they had very little access to material for children like stories and poems etc. So we started a section for children in our newsletter called 'Chotyanchi Vanasthali'. Immediately, we faced the problem of people prepared to write for rural children because urban writers were totally unaware of these children's world. Hence I was forced to write for children myself.

I had learnt painting from J.J. School of Arts, so I started illustrating this section myself too. To write for children, I read up a lot of material for children even in English and French. Initially, I would even take stories from other sources that I liked and shape them myself.

Q 2: What do you think is specially required when writing for children?

Ans 2: We cannot be insincere when writing for children, because they cannot demand standards from us or criticize. Even if you compromise for adults in the face of deadlines etc, it should never be done for children.

Q 3: What other message do you have for writers and illustrators for children?

Ans 3: People in this field need to see the children's world in totality. Children do not live in closeted and compartmentalized existence. They are surrounded by adults and constantly interact with the adults' world. In earlier times this interaction was more pronounced in extended families with a whole range of ages of adults and other children surrounding a child. It is a fallacious view of seeing a child having a world solely of his or her own.

Authors have to listen, observe and learn life as a whole to write for children, and not observe them in isolation, let's say, in a school alone. They have also to read a lot of others' writings.

Q 4: What is your relation to children and how has it influenced your writing?

Ans 4: I do not have children of my own and have also not had children around me for a large part of my life. In fact, I do not have a lot of patience with children. In order to write for children (And otherwise understand life too), I read and observed a lot. My sensibilities have been developed by a large amount of reading of every kind, not necessarily classical literature, but even popular or bad literature. I read things many times also to understand nuances. I have also delved a lot into theatre and films and kept myself open to all kinds of influences, to absorb everything. This also contributed a lot in creating 'Vachu Anande'.

Q 5: You visibly treat your young readers with respect and seem to be able to place yourself in their minds. Without actual interaction with children, how do you understand them so well?

Ans 5: I look upon my own consciousness as a young person and see what influence I have of the things I had read, whether painful or joyful, or how they affected me. In those times, there was not a culture of too much communication of adults with children. Young people were left to figure out life for themselves. Nobody helped me out with my questions on life. At such times, literature helped me find my answers. I would develop a very personal respect or association with an author/poet. E.g. Vijay Tendulkar's or Kumar Gandharva's death was a personal loss to me, even if I did not know the person in question well, because I related to the creator quite personally.

It is vital for children today to explore various paths for learning. And this is precisely why we cannot keep children's material too tightly defined. When I was selecting pieces for 'Vachu Anand', there was a difference of opinion on many pieces. Some people felt 'children will not be able to appreciate this'. I do not think what is appropriate for a particular age group can be so rigidly selected. Expose them to all kind of materials. If they like them, they will read. If they do not understand it fully now, doesn't matter, they will do so next year.

Q 6: What do you think can be done to enhance the status of children's literature in society?

Ans 6: I never bothered about money, because I do not have liabilities, and did work for passion alone. But other people need money and recognition both, for them to take this profession seriously and also for the profession to have status in society.

For people to understand that this work is as serious as publishing for adults, someone has to start with high quality work. Only after good work is done, can we see its impact on children. I wrote for children for 16-17 years and did not compromise on quality, even though work

done in 1987 was compiled as books as late as 2002. I have heard people say, 'It is because of your writings only that my child comes to the balwadi'. We can bring change through hard work, not through mere talk.

Q 7: What are the main problems you see with this sector?

Ans 7: In Marathi children's literature, often people have not grown with the times. In fact, many don't have an appreciation of what it is to move with the times, or what needs to be done for quality work. It requires time and dedication and most people are not able to dedicate so much time.

Besides, it is easy to find material for children of 7-8 years of age, but there is very little written for adolescents between 9-14 years of age, when they are neither children nor adults. Maximum material is needed at this transitional age because children have become comfortable readers by now. They can choose and decide materials for themselves. If not given good literature at this crucial stage, they drop the reading habit, which must be sustained to survive in adulthood.

One must be careful while writing for adolescents. We will have to understand the kind of concerns they have, their worries, their relationship with adults, their world etc. We cannot write for them just on the understanding of our own teenage. We will have to be sensitive about which subjects to choose, what language and what imagery we build with our words. People either write in very simplistic language or fill it up with Sanskritized language when writing for adolescents.

Q 8: Any comment on illustrations for children?

Ans 8: We have to think a lot on visual language, which children relate most easily with. Illustrations should not be a mere 'translation' or 'transcription' of the text into art. At times, illustrators don't even want to read the text to know whether they have to draw a lion, or a bird. They straight away ask the requirement and draw without relating to the story. They have to listen, read and think to fill in the spaces between lines. The art should complement and supplement the text.

Q 9: Does a book like 'Vachu Anand', which is a collection of a large no. of pieces and is a thick series, sell well with common people, other than libraries?

Ans 9: Yes, many individuals also buy these books to keep in their personal collection. Since it has sufficient references to classics, people use it as reference material too. It has a steady sale and has already gone into 3-4 editions. Because of Government support, we were able to bring it out at very low costs too.

(Original, Unedited version)

