

Picture Story Books in Hindi No shortcuts please

Tultul Biswas

Picture books—the term that can best describe them and that comes first to my mind is 'life-long friends'. I still remember the brightly coloured Russian and Chinese books that my parents gifted to me on each of my birthdays and the delight that followed! Not to forget the few Bangla ones that we could lay our hands on—mostly in black-and white—but so vividly illustrated that they etch an indelible impression.

So what have been the trends in Indian publishing as far as picture story-books in Hindi are concerned? At the outset I must acknowledge the unmatched contributions made by the Nehru Bal Pustakalaya series of the National Book Trust in this field. In its nascent years, the Nehru Bal Pustakalaya series provided us with a whole treasure house of innovatively conceptualized, written and illustrated books. Soon the Children's Book Trust followed suit and we had beautifully and profusely illustrated picture books coming our way. However, one was not always happy with the message-happy stories in most of the picture books published by CBT.

And what is the scenario today? In the last five years or so, on the surface at least, the industry seems to have taken a vibrant turn. We have a growing number of publishers taking up children's books in Hindi, a lot of new writers and illustrators finding space and recognition. In addition to NBT and CBT, we have groups like Tulika, Centre for Learning Resources, Eklavya, Remadhav Publications and others giving a serious boost to this field. So let us take a look at the quality of the content, design and illustrations of the picture books coming our way. The covers are very colourful, the paper thick and sturdy in most—in fact even glossy in some, the illustrations quite innovative and appealing in many, and the content?

I have here a set of 11 books recently published by Katha—*Kamal Se Bhara Aakash*, *Kokila Ka Mast Matka*, *Jishnu Ki Chaturai*, *Jadui Martbaan*, *Gupgupangdas*, *Baagh Ka Panja* and so on. All the books are reprints of stories earlier published in *Tamasha*—the children's magazine brought out by Katha. All these stories, except *Gupgupangdas* has a message to give to the reader. *Kokila Ka ...* and *Jishnu ...* talk about cleanliness and hygiene, *Baagh Ka Panja* about health, sickness, superstitions and healing, *Kamal Se ...* about the fireworks industry and children working in them. The illustrations in most of these books are four-colour, the paper thick and glossy and the design appealing.

The books have also been shaped innovatively and elegantly to be able to stand out on a rack and appeal to their child readers. Most of the stories have been written with a purpose and the issues being raised are no doubt of import. However, the question that flashes across one's mind on reading these books is whether the method of raising these issues is as appropriate. The purpose of writing these stories and the messages that they want to convey have been brought out so simplistically and starkly that the books have become propaganda tools rather than story books. *Gupgupangdas* is a welcome exception. It has a story to tell—a Chinese folktale with all the

elements of a winding lore, and no strings attached. It has delightful illustrations by Sujata Singh, inspired by the Madhubani style, in two-colours.

Choocha Saat Poonchhon Vala, *Tapasya*, and *Paheli* are some of the new titles published by NBT in the Nehru Bal Pustakalaya series. *Tapasya* is the story of a boy who wants to go to the forest to perform *tapasya* to be able to do well in Mathematics. He is then artfully convinced by his grandfather that *tapasya* can be done at home, by putting in one's best efforts into whatever one has chosen to do. This is more of an illustrated story book for older children—a formula story typically illustrated to portray a middle class, Hindu, patriarchal family. There is nothing in the book that can celebrate it as a publication of NBT in its 50th year of existence. *Paheli* is a story written and illustrated by Jagdish Joshi. The illustrations mark his signature style—brilliant colours, elaborate details and impeccably portrayed birds and animals. The story is about the movement of the sun, how it causes day and night, how it causes the seasons to change, how sunlight helps the plants to make food. The book conveys these concepts in a simple and enjoyable conversational format. *Choocha Saat Poonchhon Vala* is a collection of tales once retold by Gijubhai Badheka and now retold and illustrated by Aabid Surti. The collection has a mix of humorous and witty stories as well as some that can be termed as 'just stories'—those that are not said with any purpose in mind, stories that are enjoyable for the simple fact that they are just that—stories. The illustrations are mostly in the cartoon style that Aabid Surti is famous for. One does wonder why the cover and the relevant story inside have a shoe-house for a bird, though. But the design of the book has attempted to blend these cartoons with coloured backgrounds of the pages—an attempt that does not go too well together.

There is a new trend in books for children that Tulika—a group based in Chennai is working towards. A glimpse of this can be seen in its new titles like *Mukand Aur Riyaz*, *Putul Aur Dolphin*, *Ghumakkad Chinti Nani* and *Jhakkad*. *Mukand Aur Riyaz* is the story of a cap on its first layer. But delve deeper and it becomes the story of two young boys separated by the partition of India and Pakistan. Nina Sabnani, who is otherwise known as a skilled illustrator- animator famous for her cloth illustrations, also proves to be a master story-teller in this book. The story, like its cloth illustrations has been woven at many layers and readers of different age groups will be able to interact with it at various levels. It has been well translated by Veena Shivpuri and creatively illustrated with embroidered cloth. *Jhakkad* is the story of a storm. It tells us how the storm is out on a dark night to look for someone to play with, someone who can be his match. The story line is simple, the illustrations—each one a painting in itself—in spite of their dark tones are very expressive. The question remains though, whether *Jhakkad* is an appropriate term for it. *Ghumakkad Chinti Nani* is an innovative story of an ant that travels all over the world—with the help of an atlas of course! It is a verse-based story full of clues about each place the ant visits on the atlas. The Hindi translation of this original English book (*Busy Busy Grand-Ant*) has not turned out to be as lyrical and enjoyable as the original. Kanchon Mitra's crayon illustrations are a delight. *Putul Aur Dolphin* is the story of a young girl in rural Bengal who saves a dolphin and the dolphin in turn saves Putul. The story has all the necessary elements that a reader of the 8 to 12 year age range would look forward to. It has a child as the central character. It has adventure and suspense, a bit of fear and bravery and the necessary happy ending! The fact that Putul here does not want the dolphins to be killed for food is narrated with such ease and elegance that there seems to be no moral pressure of any kind on the reader. Putul's act of saving the dolphins looks like the most natural thing for her to do. The

colour illustrations by Proiti Roy deftly bring out the natural scenic beauty of rural Bengal. Even the characters give the essence of real life rural Bengal as I have witnessed in my childhood.

So what are the generalities or common elements that we find? One question that keeps zipping through my mind is—why are we becoming so message oriented? Why can't a beautiful story remain just that? It is a cause of worry and concern to me that Katha too, otherwise known for its rich collection of very good translations of choicest vernacular Indian literature, succumbs to the pressures of stories steeped with messages to the children? I am ready to see the need of and effort to raise pertinent social and environmental issues in children's literature. But the concern is that this is being done at the cost of the story as a genre and children's books as a literary form. Why is it that when it comes to children's books, just about anything and everything seems to be alright? There seems to be a growing and worrisome trend that anything and everything that is illustrated beautifully and brightly and printed on glossy paper is good enough for our children. How can we be so careless about *what* we give to read to our own children? I am forced to say with a considerable amount of alarm and concern, that we are faced with the stark reality that most publishers today appear to be taking the shortest cuts when it comes to children's books.

Tultul Biswas has crossed her teens twice over but cannot grow out of reading every children's book she can lay her hands on! She was part of the editorial team of *Chakmak*, a children's science magazine published by Eklavya and now works in its Title Publications section.

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