

# Growing Landscape of Children's Literature in India

SIDRA FARIAH

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, numerous children's authors and illustrators in India wrote books focusing on promoting safety and providing guidance on protecting oneself from COVID-19. Titles such as *The Novel Coronavirus: We Can Stay Safe* (2020), *KovyNintee: Divya Gets Battle-ready* (2020), and *Farmer Falgu Stays at Home* (2020) come to mind.

One remarkable picture book I read was *Jamlo Walks* (2021) by Samina Mishra and Tarique Aziz. This book reflects the life story of 12-year-old Jamlo Makdam, who comes from a disadvantaged rural background and labours on a chilli farm far from her home. Her story is interwoven with the experiences of other child characters Tara, Rahul, and Aamir, from middle-class urban families as they navigate life during the COVID-19 pandemic in India. *Jamlo Walks* validates the experiences of children who embarked on arduous journeys, braving hundreds of kilometres with their families or even alone, in their attempt to return home when faced with a sudden and severe nationwide lockdown.

*Jamlo Walks* highlights and encapsulates the radical need in Indian children's literature for the inclusion of experiences of children otherwise absent from

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narratives. This is especially challenging because, given the intense competition for scarce higher and professional education resources, most Indian children are given little time for leisure reading. The culture of reading books among children remains uneven in India reflecting its inequalities. Only the privileged or the most determined parents and children can access age-appropriate literature. On the one side of the socio-economic divide, children lack books per se and on the other side is a preponderance of books which creates blindspots in their imagination.

## Shifting Context

It is important to acknowledge the crucial role played by public institutions, civil society initiatives, and the free library movement in commissioning, publishing, and making available good quality children's books in different genres and languages nationwide, through digital and offline mediums. If the growing number of events, conferences, and publications dedicated to children's books and media content is any indicator, it bodes well for

children as well as those engaged in research and production for young citizens. Even though these efforts are far from being adequate for India's young readers, they still signal a pressing need to observe and research children's media and literary culture. Catering to this need is the appearance of *Children's Books: An Indian Story*—a comprehensive anthology of essays and reflections on children's books in India by some of the most important practitioners engaged in this field. Published by Parag Initiative (Tata Trust) and Eklavya Foundation, the volume carries a wide range of contributions from Indian publishers, writers, illustrators, translators, educators, and free library movement activists, among others.

The anthology consists of 13 chapters organised into four thematic sections. There are three historical phases through which the editors and contributors of the book take the readers: the late colonial, post-independence, and post-liberalisation periods.

In the introductory chapter, editors Shailaja Menon and Sandhya Rao do an excellent job of laying out the structure of the book through a discussion of the key concerns and arguments of the chapters. They begin by providing a much-needed historical background of children's literature in India, by highlighting the long-existing tradition of oral and performative traditions dating back to approximately 5,000 years. Menon and Rao discuss the developments and shifts brought under colonial rule when books in English were introduced and

widely promoted, primarily targeting the “respectable middle-class” child. In the post-independence period, the focus shifted to creating ideal citizens, and children were seen as the future of the newly created nation state. Thus, institutions like the National Book Trust and the Children’s Book Trust were established to support the production of good and affordable children’s books sensitive to the heritage and diversity of the newly independent country.

Inaugurated in the 1990s, liberalisation policies significantly opened up the economy for the private sector, which paved the way for foreign as well as Indian publishers who largely confined themselves to catering to urban middle-class children. The chapter primarily explores the evolution of English children’s literature, and it is only in the later part of the chapter that the authors mention contemporary regional language publishing and translations. However, it would have been beneficial to include insights into the status of regional language literature, particularly Bengali and Malayalam,

which were already producing books and magazines for children.

### **Texts: Oral and Institutional**

The first section, titled “Understanding the Terrain: Children’s Literature in India,” paints a background of India’s oral and performative storytelling traditions, and their evolution and print and digital media adaptations. There are two essays in this section. Deepa Kiran explores the oral and performative traditions in India. The discussion on stories meant for a “multi-age audience” and transmission is particularly fascinating. Radhika Menon traces the evolution in the publishing domain. The trajectory begins with the National Book Trust and Children’s Book Trust. The availability and popularity of translated Chinese and Russian children’s literature due to the international outreach of the communist states from 1960 to 1980, is also a part of this essay. The chapter concludes with a critical assessment of contemporary independent publishers like Pratham, Eklavya, and Tara Books, among others.

The second section, “The Moving Landscape: Looking at Books,” details through the four essays the post-liberalisation transformations in the children’s book landscape, including the status of various genres, themes, and issues and the place of illustrations. Deepa Balsavar focuses on the history of children’s book illustration in India. She makes an important observation about Indian parents (or the guardians) who prefer young readers to read rather than engage with picture books. Thejaswi Shivanand argues that fiction, poetry and plays written for children are usually didactic in nature. She also remarks on the use of humour to keep children engaged.

Niveditha Subramaniam complicates the debate about what constitutes suitable and popular in children’s literature. Joining the issue with previous contributors, she highlights that children’s literature is not entirely about fictional stories with happy endings, and young readers do not read only for pleasure. Ellen Key (1909), a renowned Swedish feminist and writer, argued that the 20th century

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will be “the century of child.” However, neither did the 20th nor the 21st century turn out to be particularly disposed towards children. Instead, they proved to be quite challenging for young people (Stearns 2016) due to colonisation, violence, wars, climate change, immigration, the rise of right-wing politics, and, of course, the COVID-19 pandemic.

While the situation is not much different in India, however, those working in Indian children’s literature, as writers and artists, are introducing young readers to difficult themes of anxiety, impoverishment, sickness, disability, identity and many others. Subramaniam provides numerous excellent examples to elucidate these themes. One of these is *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability* (2011), a graphic novel on the life of B R Ambedkar foregrounding his struggle against caste-based discrimination and inequality. Done in Gond art style, the book subverts the traditional Western template of writing a graphic novel by dismantling linear reading and rectangular boxes. *Let’s Go Time Travelling* (2012) and *Let’s Go Time Travelling Again!* (2021) offer a glimpse into India’s diverse culture through quick snapshots and amusing facts, thereby making history accessible and engaging. *My Sweet Home: Childhood Stories from a Corner of the City* (2017) is a good example of participatory book projects where children play an integral role in the writing and designing of the book.

Devika Rangachari’s chapter, “A Bridge from Children’s to Adult Literature: Young Adults Books,” discusses the transition from didactic and moralising themes to more difficult ones centring on the day-to-day issues. It highlights the gate-keeping role played by parents or guardians, teachers, and librarians who are reluctant to let young readers’ access to books with seemingly difficult or complex themes.

### Developing Diverse Readers

“Uneven Ground: Issues in Children’s Literature” is the third section where authors explore the challenges they face with regard to the issues of representation, improving accessibility for readers with special needs and the fraught terrain of

translating for children. Here, writers have attempted to address the challenges arising from India’s mind-boggling diversity. They explore the different strategies through which writers and illustrators can accurately represent diverse childhood experiences from across regions, religions, castes, genders, and abilities. Despite the various challenges associated with this, it is crucial to remember that the audience for these books is not just the urban middle-class children in metro cities but children across the country.

The fourth and final section, “As You Sow: Using Books with Children,” explores the place of literature in children’s lives and what could be done to reduce the gap between them and the books. There are three essays on engaging children and cultivating their love for reading and storytelling. As it is important to introduce children to literature at a young age, the contributors emphasise promoting reading habits and environments both at school and at home. Free public libraries emerging in places like Delhi and Goa to serve children who may not have access to books due to a variety of reasons is one of the most radically inclusive initiatives to promote reading and citizenship. The chapter titled “Free Libraries Movement in India” involves a conversation with Mridula Koshy, a free library movement activist in New Delhi. Koshy emphasises the absence of a national policy on libraries in India. In these policies, libraries are often seen as an extracurricular activity rather than an essential part of education. The Free Library Network attempted to address this gap but encountered structural challenges, including a lack of space, books, funds, and library training to enhance their capacity to operate effectively.

### In Conclusion

Apart from the 13 chapters, there are six smaller “companion pieces” titled “voices.” These are first-person accounts of children’s book writers, illustrators, publishers, librarians, and readers sharing their personal experiences of working with and for children. In “Voices: A Reader Speaks,” Keerthi Mukunda, a junior and middle school language teacher, shares

her story of how she became an avid reader by diving into books like *The Famous Five*, *Hardy Boys* and *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl*. Towards the end, she includes a few anecdotes of read-aloud story sessions with students. A greater emphasis on young readers’ perspectives would have made this section more comprehensive, as most of the personal essays too are focused on the textual content of the books or the institutional and production contexts.

The anthology will be helpful for aspiring writers, artists, activists and culture entrepreneurs who want to understand the opportunities and challenges in the field even as they plan to become public publishers, writers, illustrators, or educators. It will also be of interest to general readers who may simply want to explore the terrain of children’s books in India. Most importantly, it is a valuable document of a critical dimension of contemporary culture that is often not taken seriously enough even by constituencies that have a direct stake in it—the state, educators, and parents.

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Sidra Fariah ([sidra.fariah@gmail.com](mailto:sidra.fariah@gmail.com)) is a trained film-maker and was an Erasmus Mundus scholar in children’s literature, media and culture.

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