Great Children's Books...Alas, Still a Fairytale
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Once upon a time, stores and libraries were filled with rows and rows of brilliantly illustrated books that unfolded the Hindu vision with such imagination, beauty and magic that children felt their own soulfullness well up at each bed-time reading...Now the non-fiction story.

By Gowri Ramnarayan, Madras

I walked into the biggest, poshest bookshop in Madras, Landmark, and asked store-manager Ms. Hemu Ramaiah to show me some great Hindu children books with stories that include traditional concepts like karma, ahimsa, dharma, daya, dana, bhakti, and the Gods and Goddesses. She nodded and led me straight to a revolving, wire-frame rack packed with hundreds of Amar Chitra Katha illustrated comic books, the familiar, uncontested champ of India/heritage reading material for kids.

Still, I inquired if there were any Hindu books, besides these comics. She points to another batch of titles, but I find they are Indian, not Hindu per se-and then not really even Indian. Though written and published by Indians in India with characters who live in India with Indian names, the story lines are pure British make. Samosas and laddus are substituted for cakes and buns, St. Avila's for St. Clare's, Lalpur for Peterswood Village and the Goan Coast for the Cornish Coast. The Indianness ends there. I browse and find additionally a few stray titles of standard folk tales and legends retold from the Hindu epics .

"No Hindu mother has ever come to me with that specific request," Miss Ramiah finally confesses. "I guess mothers just interpret Hinduism from

mythological tales. It is the NRI's (non-resident Indians) who feel the need for this kind of information. Those who live in India have such a sense of religious and cultural identity that they don't look for books to explain Hinduism to their children. It's all there, part of their ambience and daily lives." Ah, I wish I were convinced. This is 1995 India -"ambience" isn't what it used to be.

I thanked her and went across town to Fountainhead, another well-stocked bookshop. I find Walt Disney picture books, the familiar European fairy tales-Cinderella, Alice in Wonderland, etc.-Mother Goose nursery rhymes and coloring books with illustrations obviously lifted (or carefully copied) from Western publications and reprinted in India much more inexpensively.

Fountainhead is typical. Bookstores in India simply do not display Indian religious classics unless prescribed as textbooks, and then they are cheap, pictureless editions. What the shelves are embarrassingly choked with are Nancy Drew mystery series, Hardy Boys, Billy Hunter, Three Investigators, Biggles and the ubiquitous works of Enid Blyton. And then there is the popular secular comics-Tin Tin, Asterix and Superman. Most children's literature could be classified as "pulp fiction." The word itself "a ground-up mass of formless material that sticks together," aptly describes the mish-mash values and spiritual vacuity in these books. I begin to wonder if possibly it isn't our destiny, even dharma, to be an oral storytelling religion/culture-the Vedas were passed down orally- but then remind myself how Buddhism and Christianity have produced magnificent, creative children's books that successfully reinforce and crystalize beliefs that their parents only casually or often confusingly pass on.

"We do want adventures and entertainment," Vaijayanthi Tonpe, editor of Children's World (of Children's Book Trust) tells me. "But the quality of writing should be good, authentic in feeling and relevant to the Indian child's life."

No talent or no buyers?

Vaijayanthi is absolutely right, but writing for children-with a Hindu message or simply with universally appreciated ethics and values-in India is not a respected tradition. Maharashtra and Bengal are exceptions. Great children's writers like Satyajit Ray, the legendary filmmaker defy all arguments that writing for children is

childish, or unappreciated.

Though stigma and stories of financial disaster scare away most good writers, a few rare souls are driven to write children's books despite the unwelcome climate. But even they get depressed. "My book is never on the rack in the bookshop," says author Geeta Doctor. "The publishers haven't done anything to make it more visible." Kaveri Bhatt echoes the opinion of most India children 's books writers when she says, "Distribution and marketing of children's books is an area of stasis."

Still, it is true that the last five years have seen greater activity in children's publications. Puffin India and Harper-Collins have been producing more children's books recently, but who are their target group? The middle-class, urban, English-medium school child. This child is brainwashed-and loves it-by Westernized satellite TV channels and video culture, mostly British and American fantasy stuff. His reading interests similarly gravitate in non-Indian directions-Puppy Tales by Rachel Macbean, and such.

"There are two parallel streams in Indian writings for children," summarizes Sandhya Rao, mother of five-year-old Tejas. "One constantly tries to evoke an `Indian situation,' whatever that means. Usually it comes off vague, mixed up. The other is Westernized pulp fiction clones." Monisha Mukundan, a journalist and children's writer adds, "And when a child's mind feeds consistently on the images and concepts of a foreign place and culture, a dichotomy develops. I mean, do we find a dark-skinned, dark-haired doll in toy stores in India? No. They are all blue-eyed and blonde! While there is potential in writing and illustrating for children, the market is not yet aware of what it can achieve. Prices have to be kept low and therefore profit margins may not be high. Therefore production quality suffers. What's needed is..." Preeti Mehra, a young mother, interrupts: "What's needed is imagination, sensitivity and perception! Publishers don't understand the child's wonderful vision. Publishers produce such uninteresting-looking books. Books about Indian culture, history and religious myth are the worst offenders. They sermonize and children hate it. Moreover, their illustrations are modeled in the Indian cinema style." Monisha Mukundan nods, "Books on Indian ethics? Value systems? Religious myths? Folk tales? The very words have come to spell dullness. Sad state, in a country which abounds with a treasure of religious legends."

Part Two (next month) will pick up where this sad-ending Part One leaves us.

And though no "happily-ever-after" promises are made, some definite reading adventures and sunny surprises await you.

Sidebar: Spot Survey

Mesmerizingly illustrated and masterfully edited by their creator "Uncle" Anant Pai, this 600-volume series pictorializes India mythology and history from from A-Z. Though a multitude of the titles bring to life peace-radiating souls like Mirabhai, the majority are filled with Puranic fight and fury-sort of dharmic versions of Batman or Power Rangers.

The British left behind more than cricket, trains and 4 pm tea. Little Red Riding Hood and all the other cute but alien European fairytales are still there. Ingesting them is almost a rite of passage, a pedigree it is thought, but a cultural impediment in fact.

Let us know India is a 24-plus volume kid's mini-encyclopedia of India and her people. High-calibre, original art on every page makes this a treasure house for kids for ages 8 to 15.

Excitingly, a new band of young writers like Gowri Ramnarayan are seeding the children's book waste land with new titles weaving together today's computer/space age reality with age-old Hindu customs, wisdom, and fun. In Gowri's Abu's World Again, Abu even befriends a 5,000-year-old banyan tree that can talk to humans, animals and other trees.

Sidebar: Our Family's Search

By Uma Krishnaswamy

Our son Nikhil is almost eight. Our search for Hindu books for him to grow on began when he first evinced an interest in books-by which I mean wanted to look at pictures rather than chew them. My husband and I decided we should start stockpiling "Indian" books. We weren't quite sure what books, but we supposed they were out there, somewhere. We visualized stories from the Panchatantra, the Ramayana and Mahabharata, maybe some folk tale about spendthrift husbands and clever wives, Tenaliraman, good stuff like that.

Trouble was, our local Crown Books certainly didn't have anything like it. Meanwhile, Nikhil was reading baby board-books faster than we could buy them and kept demanding more. He turned two, then three. Literacy loomed. We looked in the local library and found a battered retelling of Jataka tales. The retelling was pedantic, the format dull and unattractive. Those picture books just didn't seem to be around.

We wrote to my mother, urging her to find the best she could lay her hands on in Madras. When she visited us next, her suitcase bulged with dozens of books. There were stories from the Panchatantra, Ramayana and Mahabharata. But they weren't exactly told for a three-year-old. The prose was heavy-handed, the sentences sometimes fell short of being grammatical. And the pictures-they reminded us of the more lurid among Tamil movie posters. Not too soothing for bedtime reading.

By this time Nikhil was at pre-school, and loving it. Then Thanksgiving rolled around, and he refused to go to school because they were going to have a feast and he was sure they'd make him eat turkey. We talked with his teacher. She was wonderfully understanding and introduced the topic of food and people-who-don't-eat-meat-and-that's-just-fine to the children. The crisis blew over. Nikhil went to the feast and no one offered him turkey. A book about a vegetarian kid would be nice, we thought. We didn't even look for one, though. By this time we knew better.

Back to legends. "There's Amar Chitra Katha," we were told. And we did buy them, lots of them. They provided Nikhil with a souped-up version of the legends we loved. They filled a niche, just not the one we had.

Nikhil turned four. We had told him lots of Hindu stories, some Buddhist ones we knew, practically every story we knew, and some we didn't realize we knew. His favorite word was "more." One day, I told him the Hindu flood story, about the Matsya Avatar of Vishnu, and added unwittingly, "Did you know there are actually lots of flood stories?" Predictably he said, "Tell me more."

So I went to the library again, to look for the collection of world flood myths. Nothing. A year later, after many rainy weekends spent in the innards of libraries, I had a draft manuscript for a collection of worldwide flood myths. It starred, in prominent place, the Hindu flood legend. Two years down the road, it is now a book, The Flood. (See review on page 10.) But that's another story.

Through the years, we did find a few gems. It is worth noting, with only one exception, they are written by people whose background is not Indian but gems they are. Here's a few of my favorites:

-Anni Axworthy, Anni's India Diary. 1992, Whispering Coyote Press.

-Mordicai Gerstein, The Mountains of Tibet. 1987, HarperCollins.

-Madbur Jaffrey, Seasons of Splendor, 1985, Atheneum.

- Deborah Lee Rose, The People Who Hugged the Trees, 1990, Roberts Rinehart Publishers.

-Aaron Shepard, Savitri: A Tale of Ancient India. 1992, Albert Whitman.

Oh, and we haven't given up. I'm working on a collection of Ganesha stories right now, and my husband's getting ready to do his critic impersonation. I have a manuscript looking for a home about a vegetarian kid. And I just heard that Jamake

Highwater's done a young adult book that's a new take on the Ramayana. Perhaps our time has finally come.