Children's Books, Part II
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Apathetic Publishers and Illiteracy Stymie Progress

Part One last month left us with the ludicrous picture of India's brightest lads reading The Hardy Boys, wanting to grow up and be clever detectives and speak with upper-crust British accents and India's young maidens reading Cinderella and praying to wake up one day with blond hair and a blue-eyed prince who will take them away to the USA and live happily ever after. Part two continues our exposÃ© of the mostly dreary efforts to produce intelligent Hindu children's books-yet with some sunny exceptions.

Besides European fairytales and British mystery series, the most common books available for kids in India's bookstores are the standard mythological tales of Gods and Goddesses. Most are written as though the author never met a child or could remember being one. There still seems to be more creative talent flowing down at film magazine offices like Stardust than in the country's children's writer pool. "Mythological tales are often retold mindlessly," notes writer Anandhi Ramachandran. "And too carelessly. Writers include incidents that are, today, blatantly offensive. One example of this is from a so-called "Indian culture" book. It reads: "King Vikramaditya came back to his palace. At midnight he saw six of his queens going to the back of the palace. A hermit was waiting for them. With his supernatural powers, the hermit created six bodies of his own and took each of the queens into separate groves in the garden." To do guess what? Is this Indian culture? We have mythologicalized our minds into numbness. We need more discrimination."

The largest publisher of children's books is National Book Trust (NBT), who translates titles into 13 languages. They have accelerated their efforts with the launch of the National Centre for Children's Literature "to monitor, coordinate, plan and aid the publication of children's literature." This is encouraging, but a random selection of their titles betrays uneven quality. The Day the River Spoke by Kamala Nair, 1978, is a classic, but too many other releases get preoccupied with teaching

and preaching instead of letting the storylines do that more naturally.

Puranas, Comics and Concerns

Unquestionably, and surprisingly, is the fact that a great many kids (and those now adults), owe whatever they know of India's heritage-to the ubiquitous Amar Chitra Katha comic series. There's good reason. They are painstakingly researched, well-written, imaginatively edited, spectacularly illustrated and aggressively marketed. Their creator and editor-in-chief Anant Pai began this mission in 1967 to prevent his nation's youth from becoming Anglicanized/Indians. "A banyan tree, after all, must have banyan roots. A mango tree, mango roots," Pai maintains. Though now on the decline, over 80 million copies of over 500 titles in 38 languages have been sold.

Pai, a stately, lean and likeable man born to brahmin parents but orphaned at age 2, and carries an old unused degree in chemical engineering, sees India's youth today drifting off course again. "But it is not simply a question of cultural preferences [i.e. West over East]," he argues. "The idea today is to how to get ahead. It's such an obsessive thing that even entertainment has had to change its angle and depict values that are more achievement oriented." ACK's stories, in contrast, are mostly about selflessness, serving, sacrificing and spiritually searching-not "cool" get-ahead values in a "what's in it for me" age. Still, many of them feature blood/gore Puranic-type violence-ones I would list PG-"Parental Guidance" suggested.

The Real Culprit? No Reading

Unfortunately, the Indian child is not encouraged to develop the non-schoolbook reading habit."Our society does not value the reading habit," shrugs Dr. Dhynesh Jain, a publisher of school textbooks. "Parents who will not buy a book for Rs. 30, will think nothing of spending that money on pizza and ice cream. Unless there is a demand, how can there be a good distribution channel?" (His recently launched Ratna Sagar has begun to bring out good, tastefully designed books for children-50 in four years.)

But it's a catch-22. There are simply too few quality books to awaken a reading habit, many feel. Today's neo-consumerist parents are poor role models. They value expensive toys more than books. Even schools frown on extra-curricular reading! Libraries fail to stock children's books in either quantity and quality.

Also video rental is now the rage. Kids can rent a video in India for a couple of rupees less than buying a ACK comic. Videos of Avenging Ninja Turtles and the Terminator carve pitholes in young minds fed with fewer and fewer images and stories of dharma. Anant Pai summarizes, "Unfortunately, for kids today, video is their entertainment. Books are only equated with lessons and information. And comics have lost that fun value."

But the biggest question mark on writers,' publishers,' and parents, minds is TV, the singular most potent stimulus of fantasy exploration for children. Satellite communications import Western shows with water-thin values but sensational stage effects extremely magnetic to children-becoming one more excuse youth don't read and good writers don't write for them.

ACK's stalwart publisher for many years, India Book House, did launch a very impressive 24 series of twenty-four 32-page booklets called "Let Us Know India" a mini-encyclopedia of India with entries on everything from the Vedic age astronomer Aryabhata to modern-day tribals. With full-color, original illustrations on every page, it succeeds as an invaluable resource for any child in or outside India to know more of their homeland.

A commendable and largely successful effort by Bharatya Vidya Bhavan to introduce their "Culture Course" series of books into India's classroom is still unfortunately hampered by the mistake all Indian publishers seem to make-blurring mythology with history.

The most pioneering and promising publisher is Children's Book Trust, founded in 1957 by India's beloved cartoonist, Shankar. It puts out 50 new titles a year, maintains a consistent aesthetic standard with writing styles as varied as the imaginative illustrations.

Beyond Books

As India races towards first place in the world of illiteracy-an estimated 52% by the year 2,000 (Japan is 100%!)- fewer are willing to hide or excuse the fact that 82.2 million children between ages 6 and 14 do not go to school. Threats to childhood include child labor (44 million), child marriage, female infanticide, malnutrition, starvation, drug addiction and forced induction into crime and flesh trade. In such a nation how does one intelligently go about discussing Hindu children's need for good reading material? Still we must.

Editor's note: We are compiling, and will publish in the coming months a giant resource list of "My Favorite Children's Books." Please send us your favorites with all relevant information-your evaluation, publisher, addresses, etc.

Sidebar: Skipping Stones

"If someone had predicted that I would start a children magazine, I would have laughed," confesses Arun TokÃ©, publisher of one of the most aesthetically hewn, intelligently written/edited international multicultural children's magazines, Skipping Stones. (See formal review on page 7, HT /April '95).

"God works in such mysterious ways," Arun told Hinduism Today in a telephone interview. "When I left India for the United States in the early 70s, I was going for higher studies in electrical engineering. However, I increasingly felt that science, engineering and technical fixes alone would not solve our social problems-ecological degradation, energy shortages, violence, social unrest, wars, distrust. I needed to explore new channels and express my creative juices, or risk exploding. So I left my doctoral studies in engineering and began teaching people how to save energy. I wrote a textbook on energy economics, worked in developing countries for energy conservation and organized a peacewalk in war-torn regions of Central America. I bicycled 3,000 kilometers through Northern Europe, hiked to work on snowshoes through the silent wonder/winterlands of New England woods and resided for three years at a low-tech, high-minded rural community (on a $100 a month allowance) in the Pacific Northwest.

"While researching energy conservation scenarios for India, I attended the War Resisters' International conference at a Gandhian Ashram in Vedchi, India in 1986. It was there that Skipping Stones-a vehicle to promote multicultural awareness and ecological stewardship for a peaceful society-was born. But I had no publishing experience, nor had I taken any courses in writing, editing or journalism. Also I had not worked with children very much, except I had some elementary school children illustrate a small book of poetry I published. Sounds like a perfect candidate to start an international children's magazine? Right?"

But start he did. With the acuity of an engineer and mettle of a mountaineer, Arun has made Skipping Stones a success. Print runs now are up to 3,000 and the staff has grown to four. Remarkably, Skipping Stones is his sole source of income-a testament more of his monkish (though married) lifestyle than the magazine's bulging bank account. His wife does most of their accounting.

Part of the magnetism of this eco-conscious people-friendly magazine is the integrity born of practicing what it preaches. So, Skipping Stones paper is recycled, the ink is soy-based and they let subscriptions increase "organically, relying on the magazine's usefulness" rather than on expensive self-promotion campaigns.

Arun comes from a religious family. "We did all the morning prayers, to Krishna and Shiva, and all orthodox rituals Hindus are supposed to do before we eat anything-take a shower, worship and offer prashadam to God. But my Ishta Devata was, and still is, Lord Rama. So even now-and it happens quite often-I take His name, Ram." Arun reminisces a mystical experience that happened when he was in the eighth grade. He and a friend were in a small temple and both suddenly saw a "big, whitish light, awesome" in the sanctum sanctorum. He ran out but later guessed it was a deva or Mahadeva. Today his wife does daily pujas in their home. The couple remains very traditional, daily reading and pondering together the teachings of Bhagavad Gita.

"My wife and I met for the first time on the 11th of December, 1991-arranged by our families-and we were married on the 18th. Like they say, `First you marry and then you start loving.' " Does his wife share his unbounded dedication to Skipping Stones? "She's a typical Hindu wife-you know, fully supports whatever the husband does," he says, understating the unspoken sacrifices she has learned to live with, and love, to nurture the unprofiteering vision of a could-have-been-rich engineer. Questioned where he felt Hindu parenting could improve, he laughed and

responded, "Well, we are only just having our first child in April and I am not all-knowing, but I do feel that with all the telephones, TV, computers and appliances we seem to be letting our children lose their relationship with nature. To help correct this parents should take their children into national parks and take them hiking, things like this." (Address: Post Office Box 3939, Eugene, Oregon, 97403 USA. Tel: (503) 342-4956 USA. $18 per/yr and worldwide $30 pr/yr air mail)

Sidebar: Bala Books

One of the most determined and creative efforts to produce high quality books on the Vedic heritage is Bala Books. 10,000 copies of their first book in 1977, Agha the Terrible Demon, a happy-ending, kaleidescopically illustrated Krishna legend, sold out in a few months. Encouraged, they persevered, produced more titles, sold seriously (over 200,000 to date) won awards and dove into other media-video, audio, theatre and digital. Their artwork is unfailingly a festival of color-pure bliss for any child. And the text, thematically Puranic and Krishna-related, is contemporary, fun and free-flowing Krishna: Master of all Mystics and a board-book called Honor Thy Mother and Father are two very popular titles. The mind/heart behind 18-year-old Bala Books is father-of-five Prahalada Priya Dasa. So motivated has he been to provide religious books for kids, he built up a commercial typesetting/printing business solely in order to print them himself. He invites inspired Hindu writers who need "a very affordable" publisher to contact him. Address: 12520, Kirkham Ct. #7, Poway, CA, USA 92064 Tel: (619) 679-9080.