Research Article

# Children's Literature in the Digital Era: The Indian Scenario

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**ABSTRACT**

Children's literature in the modern world is undergoing sea changes. The introduction of Information Communication Technology (ICT) has had an impact even on children's literature. There have been changes not only in the contents but also in the way literature is presented to children. Advanced science has introduced many electronic gadgets, which have prompted children to be glued to them, reading, watching, or even listening to their favourite literature. Children of today are increasingly drawn to digital screens, and literature is being written for them, making it suitable for this medium. However, whatever is being said is applied to Western countries. In the Indian subcontinent, children's literature is not so influenced by modern gadgets or ICT. Even the genre of children's literature is being neglected in India. If at all it is in existence, it is only in the form of short stories or pictorial cartoons. Only a few Indian characters are popular among children. Characters from epics and *puraanas* are still used repeatedly by children filmmakers and publishers. This paper aims to analyze these issues. An effort has also been made to compare the present status of children's literature of the West and that of India.

**KEYWORDS:** digital, narratives, grandparents, *puraanas*, hypertextuality

**FULL PAPER**

**Introduction**

Children's Literature can be defined as literature meant for children or young adults. Children's literature can either be written by children or by adults. However, the only fact that remains is that the literature must be written with children or young adults in mind.

For centuries, literature for children has been a staple across the world. The Arabian Nights, Panchatantra, Jataka Tales, and Hitopadesha are a few examples of children's literature. India also has a rich tradition of oral narratives. Stories were told by grandparents to grandchildren, and they ranged from epic tales like the Ramayana and *Mahabharata* to imaginary, self-created ones. They were often termed as 'bedtime' stories. This was the prevailing practice everywhere. Children who went to school sometimes wished to study these same stories in print, or they would enjoy reading comic books like the Amar Chitra Katha series, which were filled with illustrations. Stories were somehow a vital and indispensable part of children's lives.

However, with the passage of time and changes in family structure, the tradition of storytelling evolved. Families disintegrated from joint families to nuclear families. Grandparents were no longer an integral part of these nuclear families, where there was a compulsion for both parents to work to earn a decent livelihood. A money-centered life was also a chief reason for this shift in the family structure. In such a scenario, the lonely children were made companions of books and gadgets like television, computers, and mobile phones. Amidst several apprehensions, fear of the unknown, and detrimental impacts, electronic gadgets were slowly and steadily accepted by parents.

Literature for children, too, began to change in the new 'computer' era. The traditional printed book format was supplemented with digital editions. New software and applications were introduced to aid students in reading their favourite literature. Kindle, Aldiko Book Reader, and other similar applications made the reading experience not only joyful but also more enthusiastic and experimental. The closeness to their favourite gadgets, such as e-readers, mobile phones, and iPads, brought children even nearer to literature and books. One should note that in the new technological world, children are often referred to as 'digital natives,' while adults are called 'digital immigrants.' This is because adults were born early and adapted to selected technologies later in their lives. In turn, children are born into a digital world where technology is readily available to them. Hence, it is not a surprise that they are more comfortable using gadgets than adults.

It is also worth noting that in the digital world, children's literature has been increasingly adopted in visual formats. As children are increasingly drawn to digital screens, popular stories from epics and Puranas have been adapted into television serials. Once they became popular, the internet was also utilized to reach an increasing number of viewers worldwide. Many popular characters, both fictitious and real-life, were brought to the screen to entertain and educate children. Television channels meant for children were also introduced. Advertisers used these channels to sell their goods in an unprecedented manner. Children's programmes were also made into CDs and DVDs to increase producers' profit and for greater reach.

Even the literary content has undergone many changes, as it should be suitable for visuals. Themes that incorporate a significant amount of magic, witchcraft, wizardry, supernatural elements, gods, angels, demons, and the like are written with this purpose in mind. Technology has been utilized to its best advantage for this purpose.  For reasons unknown, cartoons are the most popular medium among children. Even though teleserials/films like *Ramayana* and Mahabharata are available with human actors, children do not get attracted to them, but enjoy the same epics in cartoon format. Even popular characters like Krishna and Hanuman from the Puranas are included alongside other popular children's characters, such as Chhota Bheem. Historical characters like Tenali Rama and even the great scientist A.P.J. Abdul Kalam are popular among children, as their lives are depicted on screen in an animated format.

Despite advancements in technology and literature, Indian children's literature is still in its nascent stage. If at all children's literature exists in India, it is only in the form of short stories or little animation/cartoon episodes in newspapers, magazines, and televised episodes. It is hard to find children's classics like Harry Potter, Narnia, or The Lord of the Rings in India. Children's characters like Pokémon, Ben 10, Tintin, and Popeye are also popular among Indian children. However, they are not Indian characters. If at all, children adore an Indian cartoon character, it is only Chhota Bheem in recent years. To some extent, another character, Mighty Raju, is also popular among kids. The adventurous stories of Chhota Bheem and Mighty Raju are available exclusively on a TV channel called Pogo. Although Chhota Bheem episodes are available in print, they are only available in English. In a multilingual nation like India, English remains a distant dream for a significant portion of the child population. Hence, child heroes like Chhota Bheem are often inaccessible to English-illiterate children in print or digital form.

Apart from these, when it comes to using technology, Indian children are not very proficient in it. However, it does not mean that they are technically ignorant; it is simply that many children lack access to technological gadgets. When the majority of children lack access to basic education, and most of these come from rural areas and

lower socioeconomic backgrounds, owning modern digital gadgets like e-books, readers, and smartphones is not only difficult for them but also impossible. The internet, which can provide access to knowledge from all walks of life for children, remains a distant dream for many rural households. In the West, the internet is both a medium of education and entertainment for children. However, in India, it is none for a great many children. When discussing 4G speed in cities and towns, it is also worth noting that 2G speed internet is not available in most villages across the country. In such a scenario, how can children's literature or any other form of online entertainment reach children?

In the West, numerous experiments are being conducted with children's literature. Authors are experimenting not only with the content of literature for children, but also with the way it is presented to them. Unlike in the past, contemporary children's literature is organized and presented in a nonlinear and nonsequential way. Even the very pattern of storytelling has seen tremendous changes. A complex term like "Hypertextuality" is used in connection with Children's literature. Such experiments can be seen in books like David Macaulay's *Black and White* (1990), Louis Sachar's *Holes* (1998), or the *Magic School Bus* series (1990) by Joanna Cole and Bruce Degen, etc. Eliza T. Dresang, in her book Radical Change (1999), explores the fundamental changes that have occurred in children's literature due to the digital format. Changes are occurring in children's literature, and studies are being conducted on these developments in the West. However, in India, no changes or studies are taking place, which is a matter of concern.

Ultimately, a simple yet valid question remains: Why is children's literature neglected in India? As mentioned earlier, we have a great tradition of oral and written narratives for children, which were didactic in nature. They not only amused children but also served as torchbearers of tradition and morality. It is not that Indian children have nothing to study or watch. However, it is only that they do not belong to the subcontinent. How long should Indian kids be amused by the fantastic characters created by non-Indian authors? When would they be able to read about great male or female protagonists created by our own Indian authors? At least, when would children's literature in India be treated with a certain amount of dignity? These are the few questions for which answers are required as soon as possible.

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