

## Indian Children's Literature in Ancient Epoch – A Bird's Eye View

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**Abstract:** Since India is a land of affluent stories and folktales, a strong verbal tradition vehemently imprints its mark on Children's literature, which can be traced back to at least ten thousand years in the form of lullabies, cradle songs, tongue twisters, nursery rhymes and fairy tales. Consequently, India can also be termed as the cradle of Children's literature; and this is mainly because of its rich oral tradition. The orally transmitted stories paved way for the augmentation of this literary domain by having a steady and firm reservoir of stories especially in the primeval times of India. Hence the present paper focusses on the genesis and augmentation of Literature for children in India in the ancient epoch.

**Keywords:** Children's literature, India, Stories, ancient days.

### 1. INTRODUCTION:

Mapping out the development of Children's literature seems to be equivalent to trace the genesis of literature in India, since in the primordial times, literature is meant for both the adults and young people. Accordingly, the art and literature have been developed for the enjoyment of the entire family. Children's literature in India, as a separate genus, is a fairly recent phenomenon. That does not mean, this type of literature was non-existent in the earlier days. In ancient India, children have been the integral part of the family - the nub of community life.

Accordingly, in the ancient years, the classics and Indian lore which provided reading material to adults were equally shared by children in the family. As a result, literature for children existed along with the mainstream of literature in the form of oral stories from the great grand ambassadors of epics and Puranas during the seminal years of Indian literature. In tandem with this aspect, Meena Khorana rightly affirms the status of this genre in ancient India, in her *The Indian subcontinent in Literature for Children and Young adults*:

Although Children's Literature as a genre is relatively new in the Indian subcontinent, the concept of entertaining and instructing children through literature, both oral and written, is ancient. The subcontinent is rich in traditions and folklore, and collections of stories united around a central frame, such as the *Panchatantra*, *Hitopadhesa*, *Jataka Tales* and *Kathasaritsagar*, were popular throughout the subcontinent. (xi)<sup>[1]</sup>

### 2. ORIGIN OF CLASSICS:

The ancient epoch of Indian literature marks from the beginning era to the latest of eleventh century. This period has epitomized the legacy of Indian literary traditions, where stories are thrived and plunged into every stream of literature; thereby ascertain the pivotal origin of Children's classics. The most primitive works were chiefly dominated by Sanskrit language. Hence the earliest literature begins with the *Rig Veda* - a collection of sacred hymns dating back to the period of 1500 - 1200 BCE, which was considered to be the cardinal sacred form of gaining knowledge, followed by two literary master pieces of Indian mythical heritage *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, which were appeared towards the end of the first millennium BCE. These two epics are the repositories of the ethnic memory of the Indian people. Reflecting the ethos of the nation, these two magnum opuses have a universal human context, by preaching the core values of human life through its myriad characters and stories within stories. The underlying theme - 'virtue triumphs vice', which reigns supremely in these epics still echoes in every piece of literary work directed towards the young minds. These classics remarkably delineated Indian culture as well as affirm the status of the child during that classic age, which Sudhir Karar precisely puts in his *The Inner World*:

In classical Sanskrit literature, children figure as individuals in their own right, with activities, reactions, and feelings separate from those of their all-powerful parents.... For an account of children and childhood in the Indian literary tradition, we must turn to the classics of the regional languages. (234)<sup>[2]</sup>

The *Puranas*, yet another gem of ancient literature, were written to illustrate and elucidate the truth of the *Vedas*. Sisir Kumar Das in his *A history of Indian Literature* rightly claims on this genus as:

Another genre of literature that moulded the mental landscape of the medieval world is a group of texts eighteen in numbers containing stories of gods and genealogies of the sages. They are known as *Puranas*, each one of them is a work of epical dimension. They are *Brahma, Padma, Vishnu, Siva, Bhagavata, Narada, Markandeya, Agni, Bhavishya, Brahma-vaivarata, Linga, Varaha, Skanda, Vamana, Kurma, Matsya, Garuda and Brahmanda*. (15)<sup>[3]</sup>

Among these types, child figure of Lord Krishna has been celebrated as hero in *Bhagavata Purana*. This shows the significance given to the role of a child and childhood days in the primal India. Collectively with the two epics - the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, these literary treasures are the genesis of many of the stories and anecdotes of the social, religious and cultural history of India.

### 3. STORIES BEING THE GENESIS:

Accordingly, in the augmentation of Children's literature, stories from these treasure houses find a strong basis for the upbringing of this genre in ancient India. However, the striking attribute of these collections of narratives are typically oral in the prehistoric eon. The ancient cult of India alleged and eloquently stressed the need for oral instruction rather than the written form. Amit Jha rightly confirms in his *Oral Tradition in Ancient India*: "... knowledge of truth is worthless which has been acquired from the *Veda*, if the *Veda* has not been rightly comprehended or if it has been learnt from writing." (8)<sup>[4]</sup>. Furthermore, Hartmurt explicates in *Handbook of Oriental Studies* that, "the Vedic texts make no reference to writing and there is no reliable indication that writing was known in India except perhaps in the north-western provinces when these were under Archaemenid rule." (10)<sup>[5]</sup>. Thus, these observations strongly underlined the reason for oral forms in ancient Indian literature.

A close examination of the oral tradition will clearly indicate that India is a rich storehouse of verbally transmitted stories; thereby it has flourished with the abundance of stories from *Puranas* and Epics. The ancestors of India came to recognise story as an ideal tool to impart knowledge and wisdom and to contour the idyllic attitude in accordance with the social values. It actually prepares a moral code for children that guide their interpersonal relationship and capabilities to deal with reality. And thereby grew a rich tradition of storytelling in the form of folk tales, myths and legends to reflect morals and wisdom of India.

In the glorious past, *Kathakalakshebhem* were held under the trees or in the temples. The story tellers known as *Kathavachakas* were the essential part of the society. And the stories were drawn from the great epics, folklores, and the history of great emperors, through which they impose heroism, strength, folly of pride and passion, tragedy of deceit and the triumph of nobility and the virtue to the young children. In short, they were moral, religious, mythological and often didactic in tone, but always entertaining. These verbalised stories which begun in the childhood, persists to lay a strong foundation to nurture, educate and to entertain them.

### 4. WITH MORAL FRAMEWORK:

Along with these stories, *The Panchatantra* - a distinctive narrative with animals as chief characters, came into existence. It is the oldest extant collection of fables in Sanskrit, which have been a part of oral literature for thousands of years. Dating probably from the third century BC to the fourth century AD, this is based on earlier collections of folk tales. And this collection of stories is attributed to the Indian writer Vishnusharma, the Brahmin Pandit, was invited by the King to coach his sons on the art of running a kingdom and also on how to gain success in life. For this, Vishnusharma devises a new technique of instructing the youths through the fables. Therefore, these fables are organised into five *tantras* or sections called *Mitrabhedam, Mitrasampraktikam, Kakolookivam, Labdhapranasham* and *Apareekshitakaratham* with an introductory section called the *Kathamukha*. Moreover, the origin of this tradition of fables - stockpile of animal characters, can be traced back to the primitive stages in the human race. While, they lived in thick forests surrounded by wild beasts of forests and birds, they had a close contact with them. So, as Subha Tiwari rightly puts in *Children and Literature*:

... it was but natural for him to invent imaginary animals and to make them act and speak like human beings. This might indicate that the fable originated at a time when people were nature-worshippers and believed that all which lived and grew had souls or spirits.... they started telling tales, expressing hopes and fears, beliefs and ideals to amuse and give solace to people. (73)<sup>[6]</sup>

Henceforth, it can be assumed that the animal character was born out of the most primitive hunting men's experience.

In the process of proliferation, as this genre is laden with the overwhelming urge to impose moral values on children through stories, a long array of narratives was framed. In addition to *Panchatantra*, another popular compilation which holds a prime place is *Kathasaritsagar* by Som Dev - consisting of tales from *Rigveda, Betal Pachchisi* and many original narratives. Narayan Bhatt's *Hithopadesh* and Kshemendra's *Brhatkatha* too occupies a predominant position in the arena of stories. Meanwhile, *The Brihatkatha* written by Gunadhya in the Paishachi language is one of the earliest collections of stories and fables but the original work is not to be found yet. Furthermore, *Jataka Tales* embellishes the traditional field, with its anecdotes of rare perceptions based on the previous birth of Lord Buddha. These tales are non-canonical Buddhist literature in which stories propagate Buddhist religious doctrines and are available in both Sanskrit

and Pali languages. As these tales grew in bulk, they assimilated popular tales, ancient mythology and stories from older religious traditions. To put it in a nut-shell, as Joseph Jacob acclaims in *Indian Fairy Tales*:

... *Jatakas* contain a large quantity of genuine early Indian folktales, and from the earliest collection of folktales in the world, a sort of Indian Grimm, collected more than two thousand years before the German brothers went on their quest among the folk with such delightful results. (227) <sup>[7]</sup>

## 5. CONCLUSION:

Apart from these rich reservoirs of fables, the most popular and perennial sources of tales are taken from the Great Epics – *Ramayana and Mahabharata*, the gems of Indian oral literature. Standing with the test of time, these stories have not lost their charm even today. They still persist to interest younger generations and become a splendid resource to the emanation of many stories. In India, these stories have been told in myriad times by numerous authors. As they contain everlasting morality and truth, this folk literature captures and preserves the wit and wisdom of ages which should to be passed down to the future generations. Therefore, from all these observations it is noticeable that in ancient India, Children's literature firmly locates its crux from epics and *puranas*, and outshines in the art of storytelling.

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