

Better Books Make Better Children and Human Beings

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ABSTRACT

Transference of information from one generation to the other has been the core of human evolution. Its importance has been well recognized by learned men and wise thinkers in ancient India. Even when there were no books, storytelling was used as an important aid to impart knowledge from generation to generation. Various other means were also used to be able to shape ideas and attitudes and build character in accordance with social values. Over a period of time books became an important means that opened up a whole new world for the child enabling him/her to relate to people, events and things. They not only helped children develop vocabulary and understanding but also question the blurred and ambiguous ideologies hence improving upon knowledge and awareness. The present article has tried to discuss the value of books and children's literature in shaping thoughts. Often varied classification criterion is used to categorise books which is debateable. However, one common string yet remains is better books make better children.

Introduction:

India is a vast country – overpopulated and at the same time a country of complex diversities. There are thickly populated cities, arid deserts, valleys and mountains. It is a multicultural society with various religions as well. Ways of life of people living in this country are varied; there are 22 official languages and around 2000 dialects, yet there is unity in all the diversity that exists in India.

Ancient India was once a land of learning and culture. However, centuries of dominance and exploitation saw our land go deep into poverty and backwardness. Then came Independence and with it set in renewed ambition and enormous goals.

The colossal task that India was faced with required working on the vast underdeveloped regions, working on the mushrooming population, poverty, illiteracy and disease among a lot of other things. Probably the most important task was building resources for child development. Starting with schools and moving to civic amenities. But among this entire gamut of activities, one of the most crucial concerns would be to endow and equip children with desirable values, attitudes and standards. This would be the most imperative task to be able to form a generation of socially useful, thinking individuals who would be able to meet the challenges of the future.

This probably brings us to the Role of Literature in Society; Better Books make better children and human beings.

“Better Books make Better Children and Human Beings” The universality of this statement was an important part of the Indian psyche... long before books even came into existence. In ancient India, even when there were no books, there were learned men and wise thinkers. They recognized the importance of transference of information from one generation to the other and thereby used story telling as an important aid

to impart knowledge from generation to generation so as to be able to shape ideas and attitudes and build character in accordance with social values.

The storyteller had an important place in society. During religious occasions, festivals and ceremonies, he narrated stories that were rich in moral values and religious ethics; had a mythological bent and were broadly entertaining. This rich oral tradition grew and folk tales, folklore, myths and epics moved from one generation to the next crossing barriers of boundary as travelers, traders and the like took universal human values along with them from one land to another.

Can we also draw upon storytelling as an educational tool? The answer is ‘yes.’

Any mother can vouch for the importance of story telling which opens up a new world of creativity and imagination for the child from the time the child is born and cannot understand a word of spoken language. The world of books then opens up a whole new world for the child enabling him to relate to people, events and things. The child develops a vocabulary, understands, but at the same time questions the blurred and ambiguous and improves upon knowledge and awareness. As a result, literary skills are enhanced, confidence is reinforced and the seeds of problem solving are sown.

So does literature have a role to play in society? To answer these questions we will first need to answer two of the most pertinent questions, ‘What is literature and what children's literature is?’

Literature is the art of written works. If a literal translation were done, the word literature would mean an acquaintance or a relationship with letters. (from Latin *littera* letter). (<https://symbolism.fandom.com/wiki/Literature>).

The term Literature can be used to portray the written or spoken material. Literature is the work of imagination, the narrative of story telling which may emerge as a presentation of theatre, a poem, an essay, it could be a work of fiction or a presentation of facts or non fiction.

The word "literature" has different meanings depending on who is using it. (<https://symbolism.fandom.com/wiki/Literature>). Literature can comprise of and incorporate words, paragraphs, images, sculptures, art and so on. It could even be the use of symbols and signs as were used in the Egyptian hieroglyphs. Another elucidation could be the written text presented in any form; like on paper or other portable forms.

Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq (702-765 AD), the Muslim scholar and philosopher described "literature" beautifully. He called it a garment that one could use to clad what s/he wants to say and at the same time make it look appealing to the receiver. According to him, literature is a slice of life that has been given direction and meaning. It is the view that the audience/reader receives of the artistic interpretation presented. (<https://symbolism.fandom.com/wiki/Literature>)

Why do we read literature?

A language or a people can be understood through their literature. Literature is the window to a culture and to tradition. However, the importance of literature is far far greater. It is much more than just history or culture. It imports the reader to a world of imagination and experience that may be unparalleled. Books/Literature make us travel; they take us through a journey of learning and evolving. When we read, we learn. The stories, poems, ballads that we are presented with can make us laugh, feel the joy of the proponent or feel the tragedy that they may be experiencing. They may help us understand and deal with our own situations, our dilemmas, and learn to handle our own emotions and cope with them too.

Ultimately, the authors' experiences may begin to resonate with ours and the authors' message may touch our heart and mind. Often supported by literary theory, it may be the result of the use of mythology, sociology, psychology, history, or other approaches. (Lombardi, 2009).

In any case, whatever the perspective we use to discuss and analyze literature, it is imperative that we understand the art and imagination that is connected with it. Literature is important, as it opens a world for us, by the conversations it has with us. Its nature is universal, and it influences each one of us. Whatever it presents and however it presents it, literature is a prominent influence in our lives.

Literature for Children

When we look at literature or books for children, the focus is on children, maybe, up to the age of 12. Reading material that would appeal to children would be books that are simple and easy to understand, that are illustrated, that provide stimulation through all the senses, books that may be both fiction or non fiction' comic books, activity books and books from various other genres. Books for children have been present since the 17th century.

Many different ways of classifying literature for children are constantly under debate. Four of the various categories that have often emerged are discussed here.

Books written by children

A very important category, which may often be overlooked when discussing literature for children is the first category to be discussed here. The reference here is to children's literature that has been written by children themselves. One such example is 'The Young Visitors' written by Daisy Ashford when she was nine years of age. A book by Jane Austen "The Juvenilia' is a relevant example. Books written by Lewis Carroll were basically written to entertain younger brothers and sisters.

Books written for children

When books are purposefully written with the intention of amusing children they could be classified under this category. Nancy Anderson, associate professor in the College of Education at the University of South Florida in Tampa, describes this category as books that children would like to read from start to finish. This category would not encyclopedias, dictionaries, joke books and the like. Some of the work presented in this category, may also be very popular and engrossing for adults. The Harry Potter series, by J.K. Rowling may be a case in point. This is one of the recent and most popular series that was actually intended to enthrall children but it created a wave of excitement for children and adults alike.

Books chosen for children

Books chosen for children is a very interesting category that would require special attention here. This relates to literature or books that is deemed appropriate for children by persons in authority. These persons could be parents, teachers, librarians, and committees that review books and literature for book-awards.

These are the types of books that focus on exposing children to unpleasant and unhappy aspects of life. These are the types of books that parents would not want their children to be exposed to. An actual focus on our nursery rhymes and so to say fairy tales often show the protagonist in problematic conditions where a loving caretaking adult may not exist, like in the case of Hansel and Gretel or Snow White and the seven dwarfs. While that may seem to be a problem, the main character of the story is supposed to cope with the not so pleasant experiences s/he may find themselves in on their own.

While some may regard this as an unnecessary exposure for the well loved and well protected child; others may view this as necessary for the child to understand coping mechanisms and undersatnd the characters' transition from childhood to adulthood.

Books chosen by children

Often children choose the books that they would like to read. It is these books that would get classified in this category. Every so often, children may choose comic books and the like as they seem to be pictorially attractive and interesting for the child to read. Irrespective of the fact that these may not classify as

literature, children find them alluring and eye catching. They help the child to visualize the authors thoughts being represented through the artists/illustrators images.

Children would also often be seen selecting books that demonstrate honesty and truth coupled with power and achievement and success. Children may find books that illustrate the dreamworld, magic and the supernatural as appealing and thrilling because they transport them to the land of the unknown with mystic and exciting possibilities. They lead to developing and enhancement of creativity and imagination of the child.

When the same books that may have enthralled the child are re read as adults, they may bring forth the understanding of various themes that the child may have missed at a younger age. These could be the critique of the political system at time the book was authored or the cultural and social contexts of the time.

It is important to mention here that many books that were originally intended specifically for adults are often viewed as classic literature that the child must be exposed to. Such books then, often find their place in the school curriculum so that every child gets exposed to it.

Literature for children can be categorized in other ways too.

Children's literature by genres

Associate professor in the College of Education at the University of South Florida in Tampa, Nancy Anderson, describes six different categories of literature for children. Each of these categories focusses on some significant genres and sub genres. This is basically a categorization emphasizing the literary composition of the work. These are:

1. Books that may be used to teach number, alphabet, colour, shape, size etc. These are concept books that usually have pictures. Books without words i.e. books with only pictures and pattern books etc. could be placed within this category.
2. Traditional Literature: This category has various characteristics; the authorship may be unknown; the settings may be vague; stereotypical characters; cause and effect may be explained or unexplained; magic and mysticism would be approved; stories would be simple; repetition of certain actions and words may be seen and eventually the ending would be happy for the main protagonist. Folktales are an important part of this category. It is through these that customs, values, beliefs and superstitions etc are passed on from generation to generation. Myths, ballads, fairytales fables would belong to this category.
3. Non-fiction
4. Fiction is an important category. This would include both realistic fiction as well as fantasy. It could be historical or contemporary.
5. Biographies and autobiographies are amazing genres.
6. All forms of poetry and verse writing would also get categorized here.

Children's literature by age

Often, anyone between the ages of 0-18 would be called a child. With an age variation that is so diverse, the category of books/literature that can be categorized in this category would also be equally divergent.

It would begin from the pre-reading stage when picture books would be most appropriate and gradually progress into books designed to help children develop their reading and writing skills. This would be followed by books that would be appropriate for preschool children; middle school children and then adolescents. Beginning from short stories, the progress would be to short chapters, and then long and longer chapters. The books could be both academic, fiction and non fiction.

The lines dividing the age ranges and variations would however be very shady as a lot of the reading capacities that the child would develop would depend on the exposure that the child receives to books; the interactions and conversations that the child has with relevant adults surrounding the books read and the curiosity and opportunity that may be ignited in the child as a result of this

Series

The concept of developing 'series' of books, where one book leads to its sequel builds and retains the child's interest. Books involving science or crime fiction are perfect candidates for this category. The Enid Blyton series or the Nancy Drew series are good examples. When a book is successful and has stirred the interest of the child, the author may conceive the next in the series. An interesting feature here would be that the author would always leave a loose end at the end of one book that can easily be picked up and taken forward in the next. Often, the series may become so interesting that even after the author has passed, the legacy may be carried on by other approved like minded authors.

Benefits of Literature for Children

Books are interactive, they help children to understand and relate to themselves and their thoughts better. They also help them to understand the notions of others and the world at large. They begin to appreciate the various perspectives that the reading material may present and are also able to develop their own views and feelings about the topic.

A whole new world is opened up for the child that promotes not only the development of vocabulary and language but also builds creativity and imagination. The benefits begin with improving listening skills and attention span and proceeds towards furthering cognitive, social, emotional and language development.

Children learn about their own and other cultures and develop a positive attitude and perspective that is essential both personally and socially.

While reading, unconsciously, children assume the role of one of the many characters in the narration. Through the thoughts of the character, the child may develop an insight into its own thoughts, values, and beliefs. It may lead to change or modification or extension, and may unconsciously build the

child's own character. This exposure to literature may modify the thought and action and the child may start becoming aware of the similarities and differences of various aspects of the world. It fosters personality and social development and acceptance of the world with varying feelings and points of view of others.

Children's literature builds creativity of course. It nurtures and expands imagination. It has the ability to transport the child into a world that s/he may never see in real life. Curiosity and exploration may be by products through which the child may understand and develop a relationship with the world.

Literature for children, books and reading have the capacity to help enhance memory. To understand and relate to a story, the child is required to remember characters, relationships and develop an understanding of sequence of events. The child may also develop concentration and empathy while being engrossed in the events of the story and its characters.

So, who are the people and what are the environments in which children's literature functions best?

The parents, significant adults in the child's life, the siblings, the peer group and most importantly the teachers have a significant role to play in the exposure that children have to reading material, books and literature. Consequently, the three settings through which children will receive exposure to literature would be the home, the neighbourhood library (becoming a rare entity in the world currently) the school and the library in school. Each setting would provide distinctive exposures and impacts of literature, but at the same time, each would supplement and support the exposure being provided by the other. In the contemporary world, there is a significant role played by the internet in providing these exposures.

There is enough evidence to state that the earlier the child receives an exposure and a continued opportunity to interact with literature and books, the better the opportunity to succeed. When parents start reading aloud to their children, sometimes even before the birth of the child; or immediately after birth, they are unconsciously emphasizing the importance of literature for children by providing exciting experiences through gestures, expressions and voice modulations. The child benefits from the undivided attention that s/he receives from the parent through a reading session and at the same time builds a lifelong relationship with pleasures of reading. It also takes the child beyond the day to day conversational speech and exposes the child to rhythm, prose and poetry. Eventually, being able to use such language may give the child an intrinsic reward and a motivation to read more, learn more and practice more.

It was only some time in the 1950's that literature, as we understand it entered schools. Before that, schools did not have libraries, probably. The importance of the library was also not viewed at all. Only textbooks existed and were considered important for the instruction required to execute the curriculum. However, by the early 20th century, the importance of books, other than text books were being recognized as important. The role of the librarian is also of great importance. S/he guide the reading interests of the children. They plan book reading activities to provide exposure to literature from various genres. They guide the use of computers for searching for reading material that may be relevant for a specific group of children. They are a bridge between the classroom and the whole wide world of books for the child.

In conclusion, can we ask the question, "Do better books make better children and better human beings? Once again. Do we have an answer?"

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