



Exploring Inclusion in Children's Literature

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"There is always one moment in childhood when the door opens and lets the future in."- Graham Greene.

Inclusion in children's literature – Is it a simple story?

The benefits and advantages of reading cannot be reiterated often enough. Against this reality, it is imperative that all children of all persuasions and abilities have access to reading material. However mere access is not enough. There must be access to books of good content, facilitators who can ensure access and who will also provide an open space for children to talk about their observations and responses to books.

Inclusion must be on an equal footing. It is not the inclusion of a lesser with a greater. It is to do with being on par. So it is absolutely essential for all children to read and know about each others' lives, situations and particularities.

When a child reads a book, she relates to it in various ways. The theme and plot catch her fancy, there is strong identification with a character or two, the illustrations strike a chord in her mind and the language seems to mirror her thoughts. At the end of the reading it is highly probable that an unconscious reflective process has begun.

My experience in working with children from both urban and rural backgrounds, reveals that there are universal favourites which appeal across the board. 'Basava and the magic dots' is the story of a village boy living with his mother, on the outskirts of a forest. Their life is simple and austere. Another boy, brought up in an urban society reads this book and immediately feels a strong bond with Basava. The story appeals to him and so does the character. So there are no barriers here.

Another child from a rural background repeatedly returns to read 'Surangini' and shares with me how much she loves the beautiful images and designs as does a child from a very different milieu. 'Chuskit goes to school' is about a wheel- chair bound girl living in Ladakh. She is a cheerful young person and has many friends. Her only regret is that she can't go to school with them. The terrain is not hospitable to her wheelchair. The resolution of the story is unusual because children bring it about. The reader takes in the natural beauty of the landscape depicted and the fact that Chuskit is disabled does not overwhelm the story. I was rather happy to take along this 'inclusive' story to a school for disabled children that I visit once a month. But to my surprise they responded to it as they would to any other good story. They loved the book but there was no special identification with Chuskit.



A child helping another to read at Shraddhanjali, the school at Association for Physically Disabled



Look for the girl who loved 'Surangini'!- Kausani Village library, Uttarakhand

So do we then say that stories and strongly etched characters as well as imaginative art work are far more important than having settings and people who are familiar to the reader? There are many more such examples where a well written book cuts through all barriers and enables young readers from different backgrounds to meet in the appreciation and enjoyment of such a book. However, one cannot

deny that there is a strong case to be made for children's writers and illustrators to be more sensitive and aware about accessibility to every kind of reader. But woe betides the book that sets out to do this as a goal, because then it is doomed from the start! Authors and artists must have the creative freedom to present their work on what rings true to them. All readers relate to the authenticity of that voice.

Are there books with inclusive themes in children's literature in India?

The series that Anveshi Research Centre for Women's Studies, Hyderabad, has brought out shows us one such possibility. These are themes which highlight children from less familiar (to us) circumstances and are powerful stories that are disturbing, moving, and raise many questions. One wishes that they were a bit less intense only for the reason that children may not immediately relate to them. After all one strong criterion for a children's book is that it should be a 'darn good tale.' These 'Different Tales' may need the intervention of an adult but they do show us the way.

What are the equalising elements in children's literature?

1. Multiplicity of languages is essential.

With the number of languages thrumming through the states of India, it is laudable that Eklavya has taken the bold step of publishing books, not only in mainstream languages like Hindi, Bengali, Marathi, Gujarati, Urdu and Chattisgarhi but also in Malwi (spoken in Malwa region of MP), Bundelkhandi (spoken in Bundelkhand region of MP), Gondi, Korku (both tribal languages with huge populations in MP), and very recently in Kunkna. (a tribal language spoken in southern Gujarat) Other publishers like Pratham and Tulika also cover a large number of languages. Their bi-lingual books can be seen as an encouragement to inclusivity. Jyotsna Publications caters to the Marathi readers with good effect. Regional publishers do exist in many states but the quality is not uniform. State Governments would do well to look into this situation and see how to provide support to publishers.

2. Multiplicity of settings, characters and art work.

This is happening very gradually with the advent of writers and illustrators across the country. They are portraying settings, characters and art forms reminiscent of their own childhood so the books ring true. 'The Why-Why girl' by Mahashwetha Devi, an NBT publication, is a unique example.



Girl bonding - A Tibetan student at Paonta Sahib, HP, reading 'The Why-why girl'

3. Contemprise different communities and their cultures. Do not treat them as museum pieces.

Many times inclusive literature seems to be a synonym for 'folk tales from' or 'ancient legends from.....'. There is a glorification of that time and age. Stories set in contemporary situations are far more meaningful for a feeling of inclusion. A very good book called 'Eskimo Boy' shows a family looking much like any other except for some distinct aspects and no, these are not about living in igloos and cutting holes to fish!

4. Sense of pride could be evoked without a feeling of stereo-typing.

Children can relate to stories about their culture or gender when there is a sense of pride evoked. In 'Who will be Ningthou' the youngest child of a king in Manipur, a girl, is chosen as the most worthy successor. In 'Malu Bhalu' we admire the bravery and daring of a mother and daughter. In 'Kali and the water snake', no one can deny the boy's skill in catching the snake even though the stereo-typing is unfortunate. All these books were brought out by Tulika Publishers.

A & A Publishers have made a good move in bringing out a series dedicated to the girl child. NBT's 'Etoa Munda won the battle' is an inspiring story of a tribal boy who fights great odds to get an education.

5. Keeping it light!

Children love a story that is enjoyable. So even if the themes are very relevant, the touch has to be light. This is why 'Ju's story' and 'Under the Neem tree' published by Tulika work so well. The themes



Children at a rural school at Shitla, Uttarakhand at the release of a book they created

raise serious issues but the children in the stories carry them lightly. Eklavya's 'I am a cat' is also an excellent example of this where a young girl is playing a game with her mother to get out of the household chores. Through the narrative and the exquisite water colour pictures, the reader can intuit their economic state, notice the tin shed roof, meagre belongings, and the torn and patched clothes. But nowhere does the writer or the character ask for your sympathy. It is pure fun that any child can and does relate to.

6. Different themes.

So far authors and publishers have taken on relatively 'safe' themes. 'Ponni the flower seller' and 'Babu the hotel waiter' by Tara Publishers are a good start, no doubt, but how about 'A day in the life



An early start - The youngest reader at Kausani Village, Uttarakhand

of Lakshmi the Hijra or of a disabled child'? Anveshi has tackled a tough theme in 'The Sackclothman' where a young girl going through the trauma of a family tragedy reaches out to a mentally disturbed adult. It begs the question of what we would have done in a similar situation. In 'Untold school stories',

a girl of a lower caste is tormented and punished by the teacher and her classmates.

7. Leave something unsaid for the young reader to think about, have a dialogue with others, and come to an understanding.

'Bhimayana' a graphic novel of the life of B. R. Ambedkar is a good example of this with a true story and imaginative art work. Another is 'Mukund and Riaz', a tale of two friends faced by the onset of partition. The issues here are complex but there is no need to spell out everything. The child needs to feel that there is something more to come. 'The Unboy boy' is another such example.

8. Story and plot which weave in 'different-ness' in a larger plot.

'Kabuliwala' by Tagore can be read like this. There is a strong father-daughter relationship into which the disturbing 'stranger' enters.

9. Ease of access and affordability.

NBT and Pratham Books have made a significant contribution in this area with their book fairs in remote places and their low cost books.

10. Matter of fact. Stating things as they are without a heavy emotional load.

Ruskin Bond's 'Angry River' by Rupa Publications tells the story of a rising river and how it impacts a young girl and her grandparents - a simple and moving tale.

11. Nonfiction.

'Trash - On rag-picker children and recycling', by Tara Publishers and 'Suresh and the Sea' published by Tulika look at young children who are tied to certain lifestyles. In 'Why are you afraid to hold my hand?' a disabled child poses this question to his 'able' counterpart. There is also 'Beti Kare Sawaal' in Hindi by Eklavya which opens up questions for girls on their bodies and changes. A delightful book on 'Some street games of India' by NBT shows the possibility of children of all backgrounds enjoying these simple games.

12. Children transcribing oral stories and creating new ones.

During a recent course on library work with a number of library educators who are taking care of

community libraries in remote locations, one of them shared that learning the language of the children she interacted with was her first priority. After doing this she hoped to translate stories into Pardhi, the local language and in the final phase, get the children to create their own stories. Another group from Maharashtra too explored this idea. An innovative idea for inclusive children's books!

Apart from the publishers mentioned, Centre for Learning Resources, Pune, and Khel Kitaab, Delhi have some inclusive themes in their publications. The Parag Initiative is also doing its bit by funding a good number of children's publishers but it is still a case of too few and too far between.



*Discovering the world - A young user
at the Varadenahalli Village Library in Karnataka*

In conclusion, inclusive literature may be one way to break barriers. But it is important to explore whether children relate to stories about 'themselves' more significantly than they do to a story well told. Otherwise we may be in an unfortunate situation where books contrive to be inclusive but completely fail to reach children's deeper sensibilities.

"Where ignorance is our master, there is no possibility of real peace." – His Holiness, the Dalai Lama.

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It has been a 30-year odyssey of fun and learning for **Usha** in her interactions with children and books. On this journey she has developed a keen interest in children's literature which she loves to share with all children and some adults. In the last few years she has been involved with rural and village libraries. She may be contacted at usha.mukunda@gmail.com