

## **Children's Libraries and Culture**

### **Mrs. Surekha Panandiker**

Convener, AWIC Children's Library Project and Bachpan Society for Children's Literature  
And Culture, New Delhi, India

E-mail address: surekhapanandiker@gmail.com

### **Second Author**

Not Applicable

### **Add or Delete Other Authors as appropriate (full first- and surname, no title)**

Not Applicable



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Surekha Panandiker  
T-31, Flat No. 501,  
Commonwealth Games village,  
Near Akhashardham Temple,  
Laxmi Nagar, New Delhi-110092  
Mb:-9971027449  
Email:-surekhapanandiker@gmail.com

**Abstract:**

*The most fascinating sight is a child engrossed in reading a book with rainbow of emotions on his face. Today this fascinating sight is becoming rare. What we see is a child straining his neck and popping his eyes to watch computer and other technological gadgets.*

*Emergence of nucleus family, security and emotional support that was provided by grandparents is no more there for children at home. With both parents working and absence of grandparents children are not exposed to their own traditions, cultural and community celebrations.*

*We need to find place and way to fill this lacuna. School libraries and public libraries are most suitable places. School libraries are the place where we will get the captive audience of children.*

*Story reading will tell them about their history, culture i.e. stories associated with festivals, stories or historical legends. Legends woven around classics. Folk Tales promote friendship tolerance and secularism especially in countries which are multi religion, multilingual, multicultural with globalization one need them more as they have universal themes and appeal. Fortunately India has a strong and lively oral tradition. We have ocean of stories – Katha Sagar. Therefore India is known as storyteller to the world.*

*Another activity that enthuse children is celebrations of festivals*

*Variety of festivals celebrated all over the world will show them a unity in diversity. All these festivals promote peace, harmony, tolerance and friendship.*

*There is a considerable segment of children who are denied these facilities. Therefore we started AWIC children project in 1983 to reach books to these children and provide them joy of reading story books or good children's literature. In a way these children libraries have become multifaceted centre for total child development. An urban child with exposure to more information lags behind when it comes to questions on history, legends, folktales, while economically disadvantaged child can't respond to technical and information based questions.*

*What is needed is to integrate both and fill up the deficiencies on both sides by using children's Libraries as medium. This will ensure that our children will inculcate all basic human values to make the world better place with peace, friendship and tolerance.*

**Keywords:** Books and Culture

Woods are lovely, mountains are alluring, Sea is enchanting, but the most fascinating sight is a child engrossed in reading a book with rainbow of emotions on his face. Today this fascinating sight is becoming rare. What we see is a child straining his neck and popping his eyes to watch computer and other technological gadgets.

Modern education system that focuses on Science and Technology is responsible for it to certain extent. With the advent of information and technology children have access to vast information and knowledge. Encouraging children to use them is not bad. But when these gadgets divert children to TV and mobile games – all of which are not educative, many of them have violence and aggressive elements, they do have impact on children's behaviour. Chats and other social media like Facebook, Twitter etc. become addictive for children. They have very little communication with parents and family. They have no time for community activities and are not exposed to their culture and heritage. In other words, their information base is wider but their emotional development suffers. This has made children insensitive. According to experts on child psychology and child development this is one of the reason for their aggressive and violent behaviours.

Emergence of nucleus family, security and emotional support that was provided by grandparents is no more there for children at home. With both parents working and absence of grandparents children are not exposed to their own traditions, cultural and community celebrations.

These family and community activities not only provide entertainment they also give relief from stress and strains of daily life. They inculcate sense of belonging and ensure support when needed. Their sharing of joys and pains with others give emotional security. Indirectly they inculcated basic human values like respect for elders, equality friendship, tolerance, care for nature. Water resources like river, seas and trees and environment formed integral part of festivals, worship and other collective activities i.e. before and during monsoons all festival are associated with trees, rains, earth. Women worship trees, all flowers, leaves and other things offered at the base of trees act as natural fertilizers and nourished trees. Trees with medicinal values were specially taken care of through these rituals and traditions. The folk tales told during these festivals, gave knowledge about nature, trees seasons, Stars and Planets. In other words they emphasized the need to maintain the balance of nature. All this was done in an entertaining narrative style with musical rhythm.

Now that we are almost forgetting these traditions, and cultural heritage, people are witnessing the result that is aggressiveness, violence, and behavioural changes in children. Educationist, Parents, Teachers all of them are worried. We need to find place and way to fill this lacuna. School libraries and public libraries are most suitable places. In other words promoting reading habits can provide way out of this mess.

School libraries is the place where we will get the captive audience of children.

School Libraries should not be just collection of books stored in cupboards. School library should be a lively place with children reading books of their choice, in their own languages. Books which they can relate or identify with. Books should be suitable for children from age 5 to 15 or 16. Books should be attractive, colourful and organized in such way that children can access them easily. I need not elaborate as you all are experts in library science. Even after doing all this to make library an inviting place, you cannot be sure that the child will read books.

Motivational activities are must to ensure that the child reads. Library books and Librarian have to face competition from powerful electronic, visual media. To bring children back to books in Library which educate, entertain and inculcate cultural and human values, is a challenge we have to face.

To organize such activities which will make school library vibrant cultural hub is not easy. Librarian, Teachers and other staff need to make efforts.

The first step and most popular activity is storytelling. Just like in watching T.V. Children don't need to do anything. They just watch. In story telling children just need to listen. They do listen if story is made interesting. One need to choose suitable story from a book in the library and to keep children involved, narrate it in such a way that children too participate in the story i.e. story of grandma's saree, stole, scarf which has universal appeal. Ask the colour of saree in musical way how it flew etc. Once children participate they will understand, react and imbibe values you are trying to inculcate. Story telling or story reading or dramatizing a story will promote education in entertaining way (even maths). It also tell them about their history, culture i.e. stories associated with festivals,

stories or historical legends, Legends woven around classics, and folktales or traditional stories provide all these inputs. Children identify with them as they are evolved out of community wisdom, local conditions and characters. They promote friendship tolerance and secularism especially in countries which are multi religious, multilingual, multicultural and with globalization one need them more as they have universal themes and appeal. Similarly animal tales are popular with children all over the world. Fortunately India has a strong and lively oral tradition. We have ocean of stories – Katha Sagar. We have stories for all occasions – right from birth to reach ultimate truth. We have stories that deal with different relations, stories that express different emotion and deal with variety of situation. In other words, we have stories that make you think, stories that prompts you to wink. We can tell you the stories of valour and stories of humor. Therefore India is known as storyteller to the world.

Another activity that enthuse children is celebrations of festivals including special days like mother's day, father's day in library i.e. Festivals of dolls, making and arranging dolls (both traditional, modern) dolls depicting different professions like farmer, tailor, potter, milkman, vegetable and flower sellers and arrange them in theme like rural scene or a factory or vegetable market etc. In fact visit to International dolls museum in Delhi by school children, teach children about dresses, crafts, professions of different countries. In a way it teaches them geography, history and culture of different countries.

Festivals all over the world are not necessarily religious. They have social, seasonal and social connotations. They are celebrated even today. It shows their relevance for all time to come. Therefore it is all the more necessary that children are told about their significance and why we should celebrate them.

When different festivals are celebrated children, teachers, librarians should search for books about the festival stories and folksongs, folk dance associated with them. Children can make illustrations about these festivals. In other words these activities give expressions to creativity of children. Variety of festivals celebrated all over the world will show them a unity in diversity. All these festivals promote peace, harmony, tolerance and friendship.

New version of celebrations like Book Fairs, book week, etc. with different themes are gaining ground in urban school libraries. They make these celebrations competitive by inviting entries from different schools and giving prizes for the winners.

Do all children have access to such activities in Libraries? Do all schools have libraries which can promote and preserve cultural heritage?

There is a considerable segment of children who are denied these facilities. Due to compulsory education or right to education laws in most countries, children from age 5 to 15 are supposed to be in school learning 3R<sup>s</sup> that is Reading, Writing and Arithmetic but ground reality tells other story.

Economically disadvantage children generally go to schools run by Municipal or local governments or those organized by NGOs. They learn how to read and write. But they do not have access to books or reading material other than text or school books. In their families they are the first learners. Naturally their reading skill is not up to the mark. Fortunately they get lot of cultural inputs through rich oral tradition which is still there in villages and small towns and among migrants in city slums. Their children also inherit lot of folk tales and folk songs, dances as their families and community activities are still alive. They have natural sense of music, rhythm and even acting or expression. What is needed is to channelize and give the exposure to their talent and increase their self-esteem and confidence. Therefore we started AWIC children project in 1983 to reach books to these children and provide them joy of reading story books or good children's literature. Lack of built place is no constrained for us. We spread a mat or durri under a tree, spread books or put books on string so that children can see the attractive books and come forward, pick them, browse through them and then read. Availability is the key. And then we use all traditional methods which they are familiar to motivate them to read. Storytelling, story acting and story painting are enjoyed by them. We include books in their traditional festivities and celebration and give them opportunity to showcase their talent. Thus reading culture is developed and both reading books and cultural activities enhance and encourage each other. Their local flavor gets connected to larger national and international cultural heritage.

These children enjoy and look forward to come to these informal public libraries. Here they get freedom to choose book of their choice and an opportunity to participate in all book related activities.

These informal public libraries also act as catalyst of social change and cultural assimilation. They help in removing many social prejudices. They also provide secure place for these disadvantaged children who have to live in surroundings which are not safe and secure. In these libraries both girls and boys find solace and safety. As one of the girl in our children library in one of the slum of Delhi said “this Library is like a ‘Surksha Kavach’ or security or safety shield for us. Here we are treated as equal to boys and as an individual with potential. Therefore parents who are reluctant to send young girls to any other place without chaperon send these girls in our children’s libraries.

In our children libraries in rural areas or villages and small towns not only children, even their parents, teachers had not seen or read such attractive and interesting books. And almost fought to pick up book to read when we started and agreed that these libraries will give them information along with cultural inputs and connect them with other parts of the country. They and their children are getting exposure to many new things. Thus they can help in removing many social prejudices about class, caste, religion etc. and make our culture more inclusive and interactive encompassing different facets and make it more vibrant.

In a way these children libraries have become multifaceted center for total child development. Seeing our work UNICEF asked us to develop ‘guide for creating children Library’ which they have published. It contains guidelines for setting up and organizing children’s libraries, selection and accession of books. It also gives tips for informal training of voluntary librarians. It suggests motivational activities that promote reading habits, along with other activities to make a Library child friendly.

Book Fairs give excellent opportunities to children from school and public libraries to compete in book related activities with cultural and creative inputs. In one such competition for creative writing economically disadvantaged children from these informal public libraries wrote and illustrated stories based on their experiences. Their artwork was really amazing. So far three books were developed by these children and are published by well-known publishers. They also developed wall paper magazine which contains stories, poems, interviews, anecdotes, riddles, book reviews, cartoons etc. In fact these children have better information and knowledge about traditions, folk literature even classics as they hear them from their elders in the community.

They have won prizes in ‘Quiz’ programmes which are very popular among children in India. Urban and rural children or children from well-known private schools and NGO schools compete with equal zeal. An urban child with exposure to more information lags behind when it comes to questions on history, legends, folktales, while economically disadvantaged child can’t respond to technical and information based questions.

What is needed is to integrate both and fill up the deficiencies on both sides by using children’s Libraries as medium. This will ensure that our children will inculcate all basic human values to make the world better place with peace, friendship and tolerance.

So let us all work toward this goal as our scriptures say ‘Sangchatwam, Sangvadatwam Sangomanasi Jayatam’. Let us work together with common objective and achieve our goal.