



Christian Publishing for Children in India

By George Koshy

“Who are your favorite authors?” I asked, in a gathering of over 200 teenagers. They sat in silence.

After considerable prodding, one girl said that her favorite story was a lesson from [her] English reader [at school]. A couple of [others] seconded her choice, and that was it. They were from a Christian group. It was shocking for me to know that the extent of reading by the whole bunch of [Christian teenagers,] two hundred [of them,] was limited to school textbooks—especially at a time when bookshops are flooded with imported and indigenous children’s books. [That is] frightening!

Indian heritage

The history of Indian literature itself begins with stories. The first models are the animal stories in the *Vedas*, a large corpus of texts originating in ancient India. They form the oldest layer of Sanskrit literature and the oldest sacred texts of Hinduism. The *Panchatantra*, a collection of five Sanskrit books of animal and magic tales for children, is thought to have been published around 200 B.C.

In fact, India is sometimes referred to as the “cradle of children’s literature” with two oft-repeated explanations for this —our rich oral traditions and the *Panchatantra*. In most Indian families, stories were “just a grandmother away.”

But after a glorious past, we had a very long, dark period. Children’s literature was not seriously considered for centuries.

Role of Christians

It was Christian missionaries who brought children’s literature back to the limelight. They introduced printing to produce the Bible in Indian languages. The first literature ever printed in India was released on November 6, 1556. Missionaries triggered a language and literature revolution.

Missionary Benjamin Bailey came to Kerala. One of the first books he published, in 1825, was *Cheru Paithangalkku Upakarartham Emklessil Ninnu Paribhashappeduthiya Kathakal*, a collection of stories for children, translated from English into Malayalam. This was the first children’s literature in this language. He also published *Sathya Vedathilulla Kathakal (Stories of the Holy Scripture)* and *Randu Attinkuttikal (Two Lambs)*.

In almost all Indian languages, Christian children’s literature had a great beginning. But the scenario of Indian Christian children’s publishing changed gradually, and it is in a very pathetic stage today. The young in India say: “The missionaries taught us how to read, but the Communists gave us the literature.”

Where are we now?

More than 35 percent of the Indian population of almost 1.3 billion is younger than 19, and 32 percent are younger than 14. That is a mind-boggling market! Naturally, the literature produced for children and young people should be 32 percent, or close to it. Unfortunately, the statistics reveal that children's literature in India is only about 2.8 percent of all titles, even with all the global partnerships and products. It is even worse when it comes to Christian literature for children: it is less than 0.6 percent.

What went wrong?

What happened? What happened to a land where the history of literature started with children's materials? What happened to a nation where Christianity was embraced in the very first century? What happened to a country whose history of Christian children's literature was powerful? India had a rich heritage of both secular and Christian children's literature. Who is to blame for the situation now?

We have to point our fingers to several factors.

Children do not read because adults do not read. Each child has his or her own level of reading. Once the reading bug bites, the child keeps reading. But our children do not see adults reading. Materialism has crept into the minds of Indian Christians and they do not have time to read. There is no ambience of reading in the house. Many homes do not have books at all, except Bibles and any prizes children won at some competition. Books are not kept in easy reach of children.

Parents do not support children's literature efforts. Christian publishers' print runs are low, because parents are reluctant to buy Christian books. They do not mind buying toys or colorful dresses. They are happy to go to expensive restaurants and tourist centers with their children. Even

those in the comfortable-income group, who buy ice cream for their children at the drop of a hat, complain about the price of a book that would last them so much longer than those ice-creams ... not to compare the value, nor to undermine the pleasure of eating ice cream!

There are few writers and illustrators. The requirements in writing for kids are different than for adults. More time is needed to understand their readers' deepest needs. The number of writers who can attract children are very limited. Also, there are very few Christian illustrators and painters.

Christian publishing has become a big business. Publishing in India started with a few men who were real visionaries, like Habakkuk, the prophet, whom God commanded to "Write the vision" (Hab. 2:2, KJV). But for many of our publishing firms, the vision has become a **mission**, then a **machine**, and at last a **monument**. Children's books do not move very fast; the print runs are low; the profit may be minimal—so they may not be very keen in bringing out books for little ones. Yet another dire need with publishers is a strong overall marketing strategy.

Print runs in languages other than English are not as profitable. India is a multilingual nation. There are about 450 main languages in the country. The 1961 census recorded that there are 1,652 mother tongues in India, including dialects spoken even by five persons. Sanskrit was the language of the learned. Under the British, English became a sort of *lingua franca*, but again, it was restricted to the educated few. This linguistic heterogeneity is another reason for the failure to publish much children's literature.

We have around 100 Christian publishers in India, but very few specialize in children's products. Most of what is available is Sunday school curriculum. Even then, such publishers print Christian books on cheaper

paper. Why? If we don't make our books as attractive and well-produced as the secular ones, we will be defeating the very purpose of publishing for children. Are children who read the Christian message not entitled to the same quality?

Children's books are more expensive to produce. Illustrations play a very important role in children's books. The problem is that good pictures cost money. Children's picture books, especially those meant to facilitate reading, lose their point if not reproduced attractively. Good paper, printing processes, low print-runs—all add to the cost of a book. But since salvation has been given free, the general attitude of Indian Christians is that everything along with that (especially Christian books) should come free of charge.

All these factors together cause the pathetic situation for Christian children's literature in India today.

Present scenario

Secular publishing in India is booming. There are an estimated 16,000 publishers in this country, producing about 70,000 titles every year. The worth of the Indian publishing industry is estimated anywhere between US\$1.3 billion and 1.6 billion. It is the third largest in the world in English language publishing. A large number of multinational publishing houses, and established Indian ones, are succeeding in this market.

Mainstream publishing today caters to two kinds of markets: quality books for discriminating English-speaking urban elites, and mediocre- to poor-quality books for the masses made up of India's vast and growing middle class. Both markets are huge and growing.

Moreover, the Indian economy is growing fast. It is poised to become the third largest economy in the world in the next 30 years, based on the "demographic dividends" that

the half-billion "young" population can yield.

The market for children's literature used to be neglected. However, during the last 10 years, a few independent publishing houses entered the field, and children's literature is getting more attention. There are about 80 exclusive children's publishers in India. They collectively publish an average of 450 to 500 products per month. In Kerala alone, about eight publishers bring out 20 products per month, including books, magazines and weekly newspapers.

Today, there is a demand for well-produced books to educate the children about Indian culture and heritage. We are witnessing the creation of a slew of book-related media—including live-action films, animation, television programs and DVDs—that are based on Hindu mythology. Its great epics, fantasy settings, characters, magic and drama are being transformed digitally for a global market, following the footsteps of successful films like *Superman*, *Spiderman*, *The Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter*, and Japanese manga and animé. The *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Panchatantra* and folktales are the fastest moving titles in bookstores.

A ray of hope

Children's publishing is growing in leaps and bounds, with large and small players in the fray. It is being transformed from a neglected and unviable business into a consumerist one with huge market potential—and Christian publishers are taking note. Though secular bookshops say quite openly, "Don't give us religious books," more efforts are being made to reach children for Christ.

In the last couple of years, there has been a noticeable positive change in the Church. More periodicals have started devoting space for children. Unconventional publishers, such as Campus Crusade for Christ and World Vision International, are

getting into this arena of children's literature. Christian conventions and crusades are willing to set apart a day for children, and to promote children's materials. But much more needs to be done.

Christian publishing for children in India is yet to come of age. Only a conscious and collective effort by all concerned—including writers, publishers, parents, children, and the Church—can achieve this dream.

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