

# Adaptation for Children: Unravelling the Child in Colonial India

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DOI:10.37648/ijrssh.v15i02.006

<sup>1</sup> Received: 04/04/2025; Accepted: 04/06/2025 Published: 09/06/2025

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## Abstract

The concept of the child has always been the source of multiple resonances being the subject of much speculation and discussion. With Wordsworth alleviating the child as the 'Father of Man', William Blake as an object in the state of 'innocence', with Charles Dickens the child is represented as another instrument of social oppression to Lewis Carroll imagining the child to be a subject of childhood indulgences of the self. The Romantics as well as the Victorians have collectively revealed a fascination with the figure of the child. The child is also the source of much discourse incumbent upon believing the child to be an entity of adult control for a larger social control and concern. What the child reads, thinks, wears, associates with are more or less dominated by society and parents at large. Upon entering a library or a bookshop the shelves have a set of predecided collection of books that designate the reading clime of the child. Control and management of this kind is not new to the commercial control of a reading curve. The eighteenth and the nineteenth century of course ensured the moulding of the child's mind by allowing the child to read books that would only groom the child to become a socially relevant and beneficial entity. Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll's with their production of Nonsense literature have delighted generations of young children with their unconventional stories and engaging artworks.

Within such diverse approaches to the representation of the child and children's literature, this paper intends to examine the representation of the figure of the child in the mid nineteenth century in India which also coincides with the image of the Victorian child. My approach also looks at the copious production of books for children which were incorporating stories from collected folktales of Indian origin. A galaxy of Indian folktales was collected, translated and published as books for children which were also available for an overseas audience. These bedtime stories became a popular source for entertaining the young minds and also helped in the process of recreation collaterally framing an image about an exotic India and its people.

**Keywords:** *Children's literature; folktales; colonial child; Nineteenth century; colonialism*

## 1. Introduction

Nineteenth century folktale collections made in India by the colonisers re-examined and reinterpreted the 'new children' both in India as well as overseas. The voluminous collection and compilation of indigenous folktales which contributed to a larger corpus of children's literature became embroiled in configuring the image of the 'native child' as well as the 'European child'. In the period between the mid nineteenth to the early decades of the twentieth century the 'child' was re-examined and conceptualised within the cultural and intellectual climate of colonialism drawing our attention to the debates regarding race, cultural impact and the influence of colonialism.

With the simultaneous rise of folk and children's literature the underlying impact of folktales was not restricted to adaptations of the tales to suitably cater to the child, but helped reconstruct the unique image of the colonial childhood.

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<sup>1</sup> How to cite the article: Naskar S.; (June, 2025); Adaptation for Children: Unravelling the Child in Colonial India; *International Journal of Research in Social Sciences and Humanities*; Vol 15, Issue 2; 86-90, DOI: <http://doi.org/10.37648/ijrssh.v15i02.007>

The body of literature thus produced did not remain restricted to childhood but further reconstituted the concepts of 'Indian' and 'European'. The elite Indians did not remain aloof to such a creation of a body of knowledge, and considerably participated in this mechanism of formulation. The political spaces created due to the reformatory laws, schools, enquiry committees made it an opportune time to reorganise and reformulate the 'native child' who could also serve as a model to analyse their marginalised condition. Native and European writers sought to position themselves as forerunners of representative children's literature. The native writers however, made a further claim to authentic representation proceeding to create a body of iconic fictional characters that would eventually be synonymous with concepts of child and childhood. Eventually, child and childhood developed into reinterpreting itself within moral and normative meanings that was driven by the coloniser and the colonised within the context of the modern and the traditional.

## 2. Interpreting Child and Childhood in Colonial India

The process of building and structuring the child and childhood in India had two very clear approaches due to the intellectual climate against the backdrop of colonialism and the new children that emerged from these interrogations appearing from the canvas of colonial and nationalist projects. This is a period of the middle-class Bengali identity politics emerging from the Swadeshi movement in order to establish a cultural capital of Bengali identity. Much of this identity formation were derived from re-reading and collecting oral tales that were intentioned towards a pre-colonial past. Books like Rev Lal Behari Day's *Folktales of Bengal* and Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar's *Thakurmar Jhuli* played a dual role of revival and bringing together tales from the oral past. Books of this kind aimed to foment an association with the pre-colonial past which was again part of a larger project of folklore collection in the nineteenth century and producing books that would remind children of tales that were supposed to be purely of Indian origin. The duality of this kind lay at the centre of books which served multiple purposes. Mitra Majumdar's further collection of *Thandidir Thole* was necessarily a collection of rituals performed by women of Bengal. The nagging consciousness of an unreparable progress towards forgetfulness of an essential Bengali identity begins to emerge due to a cogent emphasis on remembrance and memory. Alongside was the availability of a market driven intention of books for children of European make that were progressively being accessible to readership. It is important to note Satadru Sen's observation in this context:

Even within the confines of adult authorship, the child is an unruly and unpredictable creature: it is an element of nature that resists nurture, and that must be permitted to resist nurture if the modern author is to be 'true' to his juvenile subject.<sup>10</sup> As a consequence, the naturally plastic child might become any number of creatures that are not consistent with the demands of docile modernity, some of which rupture the boundaries of the geographies of childhood. Sen 3: 2004

For the school going child which again was a purely colonial agency imparted an education that was guided by the principles of British authorship. However, beyond the British efforts to delineate a juvenile geography that was urban and metropolitan in its structure included 'tropical' content that was meant to involve a readership of colonised children. Middle-class childhoods, however, came under the same umbrella that Partha Chatterjee has identified in the context of the 'women's question': as a corner of respectable domesticity, it was protected by national walls.<sup>15</sup> the colonial child was more or less shifting its base between the native representations alongside a particular influence of European thought agencies.

By the first decades of the twentieth century the magazine market of the period became conscious of the presence of the possibility of magazines for children. Upendrakishore Ray Chaudhuri's *Sandesh* later taken up by his prodigiously gifted son Sukumar Ray and grandson Satyajit Ray for example was heavily influenced by Edward Lear's iconic literature of the Nonsense as well as that of Lewis Carroll. These derivations were themselves dependent upon the ability of the Bengali child to make a leap of identity and become a brown Alice, displacing the bizarre on to unnamed alien locations. These magazines collaborated broadly in the construction of a literary and pedagogical child that was generally Hindu and middle-class. Ray incorporates the aesthetics of a Victorian pedagogy while being critical of the fastidious Bengali intelligentsia. Muslim and Christian children appear infrequently with non-bhadralok children represented as subordinates or servants or outsiders. The childhood imagined is broadly but not simply gendered:

protagonists are not inevitably boys, and the reader is only inconsistently imagined as male. Girl children, not surprisingly, appear as the bearers of 'tradition' and domesticity, but they also make occasional appearances as incompletely domesticated carriers of a middle-class modernity. In terms of the nature and subject matter for the magazines Sen mentions:

A staple feature of all the magazines is the exploration narrative: stories about travel to particular geographies, and stories that located the reader's home in relation to places that were clearly not home. The meanings of these juvenile geographies can be decoded within the twin contexts of colonialism and the uncertainly political child. Sen 4:2004

### 3. Colonial Narratives

Co-existent with the copious collection of folktales, folklore, rituals made during the nineteenth century by the likes of Sir William Crooke or Captain Richard Carnac Temple was a chunk of production of tales by the wives and daughters of the colonial administrators who usually utilised their leisure time in collecting folktales from the native 'ayahs' or 'khidmatgars' stationed with the colonial family entourage. Unlike their more officious parents or husbands the young ladies of the British colonial household followed a similar pattern of indigenous representation which was similar yet not completely faithful to a pedagogical approach to folktale collections. In the year 1869 Mary Frere the daughter of the Bombay presidency governor Sir Bartle Frere came up with a collection of indigenous folktales of the area titled *Old Deccan Days*. It was published in London and was well received. Another collection *Indian Fairy Tales* by a very young Maive Stokes who was the daughter of another senior civil servant in Calcutta soon appeared. In 1884-85 Captain R.C. Temple came up with a similar collection of stories titled *Legends of Punjab*. In the subsequent decades several collections of Indian folklore came about by British missionaries, civil and military officers and by their family members in India. While none of the household members were professional folklorists, they exhibited a keen eye for collecting and compiling folktales. These stories introduced an orientalist version of the classical and religious texts of the past claiming to produce and present 'another' India, perhaps "the real India". These collections were primarily regional in nature often been made by collections made from the district or within the area under the collector's administrative control. Sadhana Naithani explains thus:

It was the discovery and understanding of the "interior," the "hinterland"- culturally, geographically, and socially- which was emphasised. This expansion of knowledge boundaries corresponded with the expansion of British political, administrative, and military influence in the physical interior of the subcontinent. In this orbital generation and communication of images, the real India with her real people did not directly figure in the scheme of this discourse. Sadhana 65:2001

Thus the British folktale collector was free from compulsion of authentic representation since their readership was one which situated a long distance away. The civilized abroad were therefore able to generate a readership mostly children in the garb of colonised inferiority. Imbedded in such stories is a peculiarly colonial imaginary of the native child in a racially charged geography.

### 4. The Metropolitan Child

Children's magazines evolved as the primary source for engaging with a love for one's own country, culture but a way of encouraging the child to travel, to explore their curiosities about life in the natural world around them. Hemen Ray in the inaugural issue of *Rangmashal* urges the youngsters to explore this possibility:

You are the children of Bengal, and you already love Bengal and take pride in her many glories. But to love one's own country and to take pride in her is not the same as blind worship. Bengal lacks a great deal, has many faults, and we must remember that. Perhaps you do not know that there are countries in the world in which children are more fortunate than you. Their lives have far greater opportunity and variety. It is as if you live in a small alley, where walls obstruct your view in every direction, and there is little room to move about and maneuver. And they live in an expansive field, where you can see to the horizon, and the paths are

open in every direction. You need not envy anybody their good fortune, but you must be determined to escape the alley. If you can do that in spite of all obstacles, that would be truly heroic. Sen 5:2004

The political climate by the early twentieth century was becoming far more restricted for the native adult whereas the child figure was more mobile and flexible, much more could be experimented and diagnosed. Hemen Ray's editorial portrays the ability of the child to imagine and emulate outside the domain of the native male heroic and therefore stories about the good life of the metropolitan children could be produced and consumed without tilting the political balance.

Another aspect of Bengali children's literature is the urban home and the school. By the time of the First World War, certainly, the normative Bengali child was an urban child, although he or she continued to be connected to the small town or the village in various ways, such as holidays when the family went 'home.' For the remainder of the year, i.e., the calendar of work and school, the colonial child inhabited a different, urban, home. A clear demarcation was set from the urban existence and the ancestral home which was usually in the countryside. In Satyajit Ray's short film *Two*, this schizophrenic divide between the privileged child versus the underprivileged child further widens the gap between the two nurturing agencies. The resolution of duality is in some ways resolved with the passage into the ancestral home.

## 5. Conclusion

The boundaries of children's literature has always been a tricky terrain duly evading any form of absolute definition. The nineteenth century globally presented a circumventing of these areas of control thereby opening up by reimagining the child beyond the accepted form of a plastic child which is merely a period for preparing for adulthood. The child became a real entity whose mind can only be attempted to decipher. By looking at children's magazine which were leisure reading material for children it is possible to configure the child as he emerged during the colonial period. In this production of colonized and decolonized geographies, rural space was typically associated with authentic Bengali childhood, and with the idea of a separate refuge from the enervating modernity of colonial civilization. The production of 'colonised' tales by young women of the colonial administrator's family simultaneously created and passed on texts that could become leisure reading for the European child manufacturing perceptions about India and its people. These are constraining and influencing factors and it is only when we can perceive the child outside the political community can the child assume to possess a liberated space.

## 6. Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

## 7. Funding Declaration

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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