

Harry Potter sealed the defeat of Hindi books for children. But a new 'pitara' looks promising

Sooner or later, our English-speaking elite will realise that they don't want their children to be poor cousins of American brats.

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I met Rupa Hathi after many years. She lived in a zoo and found herself ugly. So, the tiger lent his stripes to her, the leopard gifted his spots, the parrot coloured her tail green, and the peacock printed its feather design on her trunk. But the young visitors to the zoo would have none of this strange-looking creature. They wanted their good old Rupa, the elephant, back. Rupa washed off her makeup and her sadness too.

I remembered this lovely story in the National Book Trust (NBT) stall at Delhi's World Book Fair last week.

Rupa Hathi was among the many Hindi books that my children had grown up with. Madhulika and I were keen that our children learn our languages. Finding Hindi books for them was my job. That was when I first encountered the serious dearth of quality books for children in Hindi. There were textbooks and other educational material. There was inspirational literature, boring to the core. You could find some bland mythological storybooks, some didactic Panchatantra stories or Vikram-Betal or Akbar-Birbal stuff. Amar Chitra Katha comic books were a shade more engaging than the rest. Children's books in Hindi were not much better than the stuff available to me as a child: Magazines like Champak, Parag, Nandan and LotPot, Phantom comics and some well-produced but not-so-engaging books from Soviet publications. These could not appeal to the children of this generation, where Hindi books had to compete with well-produced, nicely illustrated, and gripping tales in English. Not in an age when books had to compete with cartoon channels on TV.

There were exceptions, but you had to search hard. The quality of Children's Book Trust (CBT) publications was not bad. The NBT, too, had a few, mostly old, decent titles like Rupa Hathi. It was a delight to discover Karadi Tales in Hindi, with Gulzar reciting the stories he wrote for children. Raja Kapi was children's favourite, mine too. I discovered Bosky Ka Panchatantra, Gulzar's gift to his daughter Bosky. Our children still remember Kamla Bhasin's Malu Bhalu. Katha books, Tulika books, and Pratham, India's leading educational NGO, also brought out some books. Eklavya would occasionally release some storybooks — I remember Bhalu Ne Kheli Football — to supplement its excellent books on science education.

I cannot say this about other Indian languages, but the offerings in Hindi were way behind the children's books in English — like Sylvester and the Magic Pebble — supplied to our kids by their doting aunts. Julia Donaldson's iconic book Gruffalo and the many Donaldson-Scheffler books

that followed it were a class apart (Do read them, if you haven't). There was nothing in Hindi that could match its illustrations or the power of its storytelling. We kept trying. Arvind Gupta's amazing website introduced us to gems of world literature available in Hindi.

Harry Potter over Rupa Hathi

The going got tougher as our children entered pre-teens. The adventures of Tintin were way beyond Chacha Chaudhary's. There was no equivalent of Enid Blyton's Famous Five. J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter finally sealed the defeat of Hindi. The romanchak sahitya I read when I was that age was no match for the witchcraft of Hogwarts School. I remember feeling very small.

Have we done more justice to our children in the last two decades? That was my question as I wandered in the children's books hall at the World Book Fair. Commercial publishers were as bad as before, with more or less indifferent collections of English books or their less-than-indifferent translations into Hindi. I should not have expected better in an age of mass exodus to English-medium schools. Those who can pay for books want an upgrade into the world of English. Those who are limited to Hindi can't pay for books anyway.

Public sector has declined in publishing too, like everywhere else. The weakening of the CBT began a while ago. The NBT, too, has little new to offer. Worse, it is indifferent to its own old collection of Gijubhai's stories or the toy books of Arvind Gupta. Rupa Hathi was sad again, waiting for children to notice her.

The new Hindi book 'pitara'

The most promising change has come from the non-governmental but non-commercial sector, often supported by the philanthropic efforts of Tata Trust and the Nilekanis. Madhya Pradesh-based NGO Eklavya has led these changes. Its children's magazine Chakmak has, over the last four decades, broken fresh ground for learning centred around rural children. Beginning with science education, they have now opened, literally, a pitara (basket) of children's books spanning all genres — fiction, non-fiction, poetry, educational books, handbooks for educators — and age groups, mostly written originally in Hindi. It has also come up with the first set of board books in Hindi. Pratham has, over this period, expanded its range of books and worked on their quality. They bring out these nicely produced and illustrated books in 22 languages and distribute them throughout the country.

My real discovery this year was Ektara, another Bhopal-based organisation whose stall I just chanced upon. I had known something about its work through the unusual bi-monthly Hindi magazine Cycle. But I had no idea of the range of books the organisation produces. Suddenly, in a flash, I could see before me the Hindi books I wanted or imagined. Sarveshvar Dayal Saksena's rhymes for children (including Batuta ka Joota) are available again in a short book. There is a whole series of books by Gulzar, one of my all-time favourites, with amazing illustrations by Ellen Shaw. The living legend of Hindi literature, Vinod Kumar Shukla, has penned another series for

children. Ektara has books in all shapes and sizes, from tiny booklets (try Take the Das —टके थे दस) to mega books. Besides picture books, stories, and poetry, it also has graphic novels and novels. I quite loved Ektara's posters and poster cards. I felt so happy and proud of my Hindi.

If you ask me to name the civilisational failures of modern India, I would count our inability to produce quality literature for children as one. (Dearth of clean public toilets would be another, besides the more obvious failures like poverty and ecological destruction). Does this resurgence of children's literature in Hindi promise to make up for this failure? I am a cautious optimist on this score. Cautious, because this resurgence is not yet backed by the market and I don't see it sustaining if nothing changes. Optimist, because sooner or later, our English-speaking elite will realise that they don't want their children to be poor cousins of American brats. I just hope it's not too late by then.