
Break Your Silence: A Call to Asian Indian Children's Writers

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ABSTRACT

THIS ARTICLE EXAMINES THE children's literature written in English by Asian Indian writers or their spouses who live, or have lived, in America.¹ Only those books that are published in America are considered relevant. As new immigrants, Asian Indian children's writers reflect the need to preserve their historical, social, and religious traditions for the younger generation. Hence, there is an abundance of traditional literature, fictional works, and informational books that reaffirm their intellectual and cultural roots in India. A comparative analysis of Chinese American and Japanese American children's literature reveals that Indian literature is at an earlier developmental phase, and it is only in recent decades that Chinese and Japanese children's authors have begun to focus on their historical and social experiences in America. As Indians become more settled in this country and as their numbers increase, it is hoped that their children's literature will also evolve an Asian American consciousness that will reflect their experiences in American society.

INTRODUCTION

Asian Americans are the fastest growing ethnic minority in the United States today because of the liberalized immigration policy of 1965. With half of all immigrants coming from Asia, the Asian population increased 143 percent between 1970 and 1980, and by 1985 there were 5 million Asians in America or 2.1 percent of the total population (Takaki, 1989, p. 5). Asians first came to the United States

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around the 1840s as a result of the discovery of gold in California. With the abolition of the slave trade and the onset of the industrial revolution, thousands of Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, and Korean men were recruited by labor agents to work on plantations, farms, railroads, and mines of Hawaii and California—work which white Americans would not do. Yet when Asian American history is discussed, one group—the Asian Indians—has remained almost invisible with the exception of an Indian gentleman farmer, Dilip Singh Saund, the first Asian to be elected to Congress in 1956 and 1958 (Chan, 1991, p. 173). Recent research indicates that farm workers from Punjab, India, migrated to the West Coast to seek their fortunes and to escape the tyranny, repression, and unfair taxation of British colonial rule. Furthermore, a severe drought in Punjab, which lasted from 1898 to 1902, may have been the final push that sent Sikh farmers to California (Bagai, 1972, p. 28). By 1900, there were approximately 696 Asian Indians in the United States although most came between 1904 and 1924 (Bagai, 1972, p. 46).

Asian Indians, who worked mainly on the farms of California, in the lumber mills of Washington, and on the Western Pacific railroad, were subjected to the same racial oppression and discrimination as their Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Filipino counterparts. Because they were mainly Sikhs (there were one-third Muslim and some Hindu workers as well) and their religion dictated that they wear turbans, the Indians were referred to as “rag-heads” and were not allowed to enter stores or rent rooms (Bagai, 1972, p. 28). Despite these adversities, the experienced Sikh farmers were very successful financially, and many became farm managers and labor contractors. By 1924, racist reactions to Asian labor resulted in exclusion laws which barred further immigration from Asia and prevented all Asian workers who were already in America from bringing their wives and children into the country,² marrying white Americans, owning property, and becoming citizens. The citizenship of Indians was revoked as they were now considered ineligible even though earlier American law had permitted them to become naturalized citizens because of their Aryan, or Caucasian, racial ancestry. Because of restrictive immigration and because many Indians remained bachelors,³ the Indian population in America not only remained small, but, by 1946, it was reduced to 1,500 (Takaki, 1989, p. 445).

The Luce-Cellar Bill of 1946 changed these unfair practices, and Asian Indians, along with other Asian groups, were allowed to become citizens and marry Americans, own property, and bring their relatives to America on a quota basis; however, 50 percent of the quota was reserved for aliens with occupational skills and professional degrees

(Asian Women United of California, 1989, p. 13). The Immigration Act of 1965, which allowed quotas of 20,000 immigrants annually from each Asian country and also entry of family members on a nonquota basis, led to a second wave of immigration from Asia (Chan, 1991, p. 146). According to the 1990 census figures, there are 1 million Asian Indians in America today (Abraham, 1990, p. 5). Unlike the first wave of Asian Indians, the demographics of Indian immigration have undergone a change—i.e., the newcomers are English-speaking highly educated men and women who have made significant contributions to American society as doctors, scientists, engineers, computer technologists, educators, writers, and artists.

Just as Asian Indians have been ignored in accounts of Asian American history, likewise, they have been forgotten in literature, especially children's literature. Bibliographies of Asian American children's literature, prepared by libraries and scholars alike, overlook the contributions made by Asian Indians in America. While it is true that there is not much literary output by this group in America because the number of Indians writing in English is small, an examination of their children's literature is vital not only for enhancing knowledge of India but also for providing an understanding of the early phases of a literature developed by a specific immigrant group. Because of their smaller numbers, and because they are relative newcomers in America, Asian Indian writers reflect the duality and needs of first generation immigrants. They express a strong relationship with the home country and seek to preserve and propagate their culture for the next generation of Indians and for non-Indian readers. While integration with mainstream America is valued at social and professional levels, exclusivity is perpetuated at the inner emotional level.

FICTION

In the area of fiction, there is not a single children's book that describes the experiences of Asian Indians in America. Since the majority of immigrants from India started to arrive only after 1965, twenty-seven years is not sufficient time to form a meaningful relationship with the soil. Moreover, first generation immigrants are generally too preoccupied with establishing themselves professionally, economically, and socially to write and reflect on their experiences in the new land. With the exception of one or two adult writers and filmmakers in recent years, Asian Indians have even remained silent on the experiences of the early settlers on the West Coast. The children of these pioneers, now third and fourth generation Americans, have not revealed the pain and loneliness, the triumph and humiliation, and the courage and contributions of their Indian

ancestors. Unlike the Chinese and Japanese in America, the Indian community does not have a Laurence Yep, a Paul Lee, a Sheila Hamanaka, or a Yoshiko Uchida to give voice to its historical and social experiences.

A quick review of Chinese American and Japanese American children's literature will help explain the Indian situation. It is only in the past two decades that Laurence Yep has published historical novels based on the accounts of the early Chinese workers in America and his own parents' history in *Dragonwings* (1975), *Mountain Light* (1985), *The Lost Garden* (1991), and *The Star Fisher* (1991). The Japanese also published a variety of books like *Farewell to Manzanar* (Houston & Houston, 1973), *Japanese American Journey* (Endo et al., 1985), *Journey to Topaz* (Uchida, 1971), *Samurai of Gold Hill* (Uchida, 1972), and *The Journey* (Hamanaka, 1990), all books about the concentration camps of World War II only some thirty or forty years after the Pearl Harbor incident. Likewise, it is only the second and third generation of Chinese and Japanese writers who have described their cultural conflicts and duality in fictional works like *The Child of the Owl* (Yep, 1977), *Sea Glass* (Yep, 1979), *A Jar of Dreams* (Uchida, 1981), *The Best Bad Thing* (Uchida, 1983), *The Happiest Ending* (Uchida, 1985), *Sachiko Means Happiness* (Sakai, 1990), and *The Invisible Thread: An Autobiography* (Uchida, 1991).

Despite the comparative abundance of books by Chinese and Japanese writers in America, Jenkins and Austin (1987) point out, in their analysis of children's literature about Asians and Asian Americans, that the diversity of the Asian American experience has scarcely been touched—the Japanese focus mainly on the concentration camps of World War II, the Chinese on the traditional lifestyle in Chinatowns, and the Korean experience is virtually untapped (pp. 86, 155). If this is true with Japanese, Chinese, and Koreans with their longer tradition, larger numbers, and deeper historical roots in the United States, then it is not surprising that Indian authors, who are relative newcomers, still reaffirm their roots in India by writing fictional works for children based on Hindu cultural values, themes of progress in Indian villages, and the pleasures of childhood in India.

Dhan Gopal Mukerji, who was among the first Asian Americans to write for children, came to the United States in 1910 to study at Berkeley, and he committed suicide in 1936 at the age of 46. His children's books do not express his inner agony, his intellectual disillusionment with Socialism and Anarchism, and the hunger of his dissatisfied spirit for a sense of freedom and some unattainable good—topics he treats in his adult autobiography, *Caste and Outcast* (1923a).⁴ Instead, through his children's novels, Mukerji directs his

search for self back to his Hindu upbringing and training as a brahmin priest and shows that reform in the world can only come through purifying one's soul. He sensitively portrays the inner lives of animals and humans, their spiritual affinity with creation, and humankind's abuse of this trust.

In his animal fantasies, like *The Chief of the Herd* (1929a) and *Kari the Elephant* (1922), the jungle is portrayed as an idyllic place where animal behavior is regulated by the law of the jungle and the social organization, habits, and interrelationships of animals. Through the exciting adventures of Sirdar, a thirty-year-old tusker who is chief of the herd, and Kari, who is being trained by a young village boy, Mukerji lovingly describes the elephants' habits, mating rituals, and care of the young. Elephants are portrayed as elevated beings because of their spirituality, sense of justice, intelligence, and ability to live in harmony with other creatures without exploiting them. Another recurrent theme in these novels is that food and body odor determine personality. Mukerji believes that each animal is born to a particular food that lets off a distinct odor; hence, animals that are aggressive and live by killing are diseased and leave the stench of hate and fear, whereas a vegetarian diet is conducive to a spiritual and peace loving nature. In *Fierce-Face: The Story of a Tiger* (1936), Mukerji gives a balanced view by presenting the Indian jungle through the experiences of a young tiger cub. The flesh-eating animal is no longer an object of contempt; rather, Mukerji sympathetically portrays the young tiger as he goes through his difficult first year. The tigress nurses and protects her cub tenderly, teaches him the signs of the jungle, trains him to hunt and kill, and shows him how to survive fire, flood, and disease so that he can overcome fear and gain confidence. The tiger is also a creature of God who is only fulfilling his nature and dharma (prescribed duty).

Mukerji's novels also explore the idea of the human quest for spirituality and harmony with the forest and its creatures. In both *Hari, the Jungle Lad* (1924) and *Ghond, the Hunter* (1928), he describes the training of warrior-hunters in the Indian jungles and their vow to protect the weak, succor the sufferer, and punish the wrongdoer. The latter novel in particular describes the deeply religious lives of the villagers and the practical as well as spiritual relationships that they develop with beasts and birds. Through hunting expeditions, Hari and Ghond learn that fair play in the jungle means that they must not kill an animal without first giving warning, must not kill for food or vain sport, and must neither hate nor fear. In contrast, rich city folk and Englishmen, lacking native wisdom and generosity, fail to recognize their oneness with nature and try to overpower it. They use unfair hunting methods by shooting

tigers from the safe distance of elevated platforms and trap elephants by digging pits—with all the advantage on the side of the hunter. As a result, the vast jungle tracts and elephant herds are disappearing. Fear of the animal destroys all sense of chivalry in humans.

Jungle Beasts and Men (Mukerji, 1923b) provides the answer to the human search for truth and salvation. Based on Mukerji's pilgrimage described in *Caste and Outcast* (1923), two teenagers set off on a journey in search of the perfect guru or spiritual teacher. They observe jungle life, help a cholera-stricken village, and meet a brave warrior and a famous magician, but their quest is fulfilled only after they encounter Data, the river pirate, who belongs to a fraternity of merciful men who rob the rich for exploiting the poor. He is the holy man the pilgrims have been seeking because he has overcome fear, hate, and sorrow as the *Bhagwad Gita* dictates. Data convinces the young pilgrims not to wander all over India in search of God because their journey should be an inner one.

It is in Mukerji's best known work, *Gay Neck* (1927), winner of the 1928 Newbery Medal, that his theory of spirituality is developed in depth. It is the story of a pigeon, Gay Neck, who is known for his beauty and intelligence, and his young trainer, a fourteen-year-old boy. Presented from the perspectives of both the protagonist and Gay Neck, the fantasy takes readers through the experiences of the characters and how they formulate a personal philosophy based on Buddhist and Hindu teachings.

The protagonist takes Gay Neck and his companion, Hira, to Europe to serve as carrier pigeons for the Indian contingent of the British Army during World War I. Their mission is to go behind German lines to reconnoiter and locate an ammunition site so that a bombing can be staged. Although Gay Neck survives (Hira is killed while carrying out the mission), his near-death encounters with violence and destruction leave him full of fear, and he is unable to fly. Upon returning to India, Gay Neck is taken to a lamasery in the Himalayas to be healed of his decaying emotions through prayers, meditation, and positive thoughts. *Gay Neck* (1927) and other novels by Mukerji clearly illustrate that fear and hatred lead to irrational behavior and arouse the same emotions in others. The Buddhist lama is full of sadness that if the war continues it will spread hate and fear in the world: "Mankind is going to be so loaded with fear, hate, suspicion and malice that it will take a whole generation before a new set of people can be reared completely free from them" (p. 173).

Although Mukerji never directly attacked the British Raj or joined the revolutionary Ghadr Party organized by Indian intellectuals in California, his jungle fantasies can be interpreted as metaphors for British colonial rule and the conflict between

materialism (West) and spiritualism (East). Just as the rifle empowers the *shikari* (hunter) to destroy wildlife and ruin the jungle ecology, so the British use their political and military might to exploit the peoples and natural resources of their colonies out of greed and fear.

Observation of jungle life also prompts Mukerji to reject dogma and to acknowledge that humankind, nature, and animals are but facets of the divine. All living things can inform the finite with the infinite and “connect” with that eternal part of themselves—*brahman*—which is in all forms of life. In *Kari the Elephant* (1922), he writes that “each plant and each animal, like man, has a golden thread of spirituality in his soul. In the darkness of the animal’s eyes and the eloquence of man’s mind it was the same Spirit, the great active Silence moving from life to life” (p. 124). Mukerji’s themes, carefully chosen details, and poetic prose reveal his preoccupation with the true meaning of being civilized. In *Hari, the Jungle Lad* (1924) and *The Chief of the Herd* (1924), he describes incidents of flood and fire in a village where both humans and animals unite against their common enemy and later revert to the old relationships once the danger is over. Mukerji expresses his earnest desire that humans show their moral superiority to animals by learning of brotherhood not only in times of danger but in times of prosperity as well. He believes that it is only through spirituality, meditation, self-purification, and just behavior that animals and humans can lay claim to superiority.

The tradition established by Mukerji reflects the Western interest in the Indian jungle, Hindu philosophy, and ancient Sanskrit scriptures. India was revered as the land of spirituality, and both Indian and Western writers turned to Eastern mysticism as a means of achieving inner peace and salvation. Sometimes bordering on the exotic, Western children’s authors like Rene Guillot, Iris Macfarlane, Arthur Catherall, Chester Bryant, and Alan C. Jenkins portray the jungle as the microcosm of the universe where varied species and plants live in harmony. In America, *Gift of the Forest* (1942) embodies the Hindu concept of *ahimsa* or nonviolence through the friendship between a village boy, Bim, and his tiger cub, Heera, whom he finds abandoned in the jungle. Like Mukerji, Singh and Lownsbey acknowledge the rights of animals to a dignified and free existence on earth. As Bim and Heera grow, eat, sleep, and play together, the very practical question of what to do with a grown tiger has to be faced. Bim sees only two options open to his majestic tiger—a life of captivity or exploitation by the Maharajah who arranges sham fights between Bim and Heera. Although heartbroken, love for his pet prompts Bim to return Heera to the jungle so that he can explore the world and find his true nature.

Once India becomes independent, the tone of Asian Indian fiction shifts to themes of national development and village prosperity. Written primarily during the 1960s and 1970s, these novels of progress reflect the aspirations of newly independent India and the Nehru government to attain the material benefits of Western society through modern technology, Western medicine, and education for the masses. India's high illiteracy rate, which has remained constant at 63 percent, explains the urgency for educational opportunities in villages. Rama Mehta's *Ramu, A Story of India* (1966) and *The Life of Keshav* (1969) have the definite agenda that prosperity and progress can only be achieved through education for boys. The hopes of the families in both stories are centered on the education of their sons. The conflict in *Ramu, A Story of India* focuses on the protagonist's lack of concern for his father's hard work and his mother's thrift in saving money for his education. Ramu is unaware of the importance of education and the unique opportunity his parents are giving him. Parental anger when he misses school for an entire day to be at the fair makes him realize the extent of his error.

Mehta's *The Life of Keshav*, in contrast, presents a tender picture of family life in a village in northern India. When young Keshav is helped by the village schoolmaster to obtain a scholarship to study in the city, he suddenly becomes a misfit—in front of the slick city boys he is a village bumpkin while in the village his book learning alienates him from his former friends. As drought and illness bring misfortune, Keshav is willing to forego his education as school imposes a rather long period of dependence on parents, but each family member feels a sense of collective responsibility and is willing to sacrifice a personal dream, possession, or pride for the education of Keshav. Likewise, Thampi's *Geeta and the Village School* (1960) handles the familiar theme of girls' education in a unique and sensitive manner. It is not the traditional villagers who are opposed to progress, but Geeta herself who is too shy and timid to leave the security of home. One day, while running away from the sound of an airplane, she accidentally bumps into the schoolteacher who takes her fears seriously and tells her that the more she tries to learn and understand things, the less afraid she will be. Geeta's interest in the outside world is sparked and she makes the decision to attend school.

Shirley Arora writes of the lack of educational facilities for villagers in *What Then, Raman?* (1960) and the introduction of scientific methods of fishing in a coastal village in South India in *The Left-Handed Chank* (Arora, 1966). In the latter novel, due to a lack of understanding of the "unknown" and the superstitious beliefs of the fishermen, the scientific efforts and suggestions of the Inspector of Fisheries are suspect. However, through the experiences

of the twelve-year-old hero, Kumaran, the villagers' vast practical experience is acknowledged and they, in turn, come to trust technology and form a cooperative society for scientific fishing. In both novels, the villagers' main concern is survival and the lack of education and technology a major hindrance to progress.

An entirely different solution to the periodic drought and famine that villagers have to endure is presented in *Chikka* (Nirodi, 1962), whose leading character attempts to better his life by leaving the village. Twelve-year-old Chikka goes to the city to work as a servant with a warm and loving family. He works hard in the kitchen, saves his salary, and learns to read and write in his spare time. While this story may sound like a stereotypical novel of progress, the author successfully depicts Chikka's feelings, dreams, and temptations.

Another type of fiction provides nostalgia for India through picture books about the simple joys of childhood in India. Author-illustrator Mehli Gobhai's *Ramu and the Kite* (1968) is a particularly delightful account of a young boy's excitement during his first kite season. In *Lakshmi, The Water Buffalo Who Wouldn't* (1969a), Gobhai portrays the joyful side of village life through the mischievous pranks of Gokul and his water buffalo, Lakshmi. A humorous predicament arises when Lakshmi refuses to give milk because Gokul's mother, the one who usually milks her, is sick. When no amount of cajoling works, Gokul's father tricks Lakshmi by dressing up in his wife's clothes and jingling bracelets.

A more detailed account of childhood in India is given by Sharat Shetty in *A Hindu Boyhood* (1970). Shetty lovingly describes his 150-year-old family home in Marakadda, a village in South India, where three generations live in harmony under one roof. Using his traditional Hindu family as a point of entry, Shetty explains the daily rituals of bathing and eating, worship and religious festivals, joint family system, and caste system. He broadens the scope of the narrative by describing his family's participation in the larger village community. As a counterpoint to his strictly traditional upbringing, Shetty focuses on the summer of 1946, just before Indian Independence, when he and his best friend plan to test the tabu which prevents high caste Hindus from associating with untouchables. The two boys touch an outcast boy and then await the horrible curse but nothing happens. This experience teaches Shetty, on a personal level, what Mahatama Gandhi was trying to achieve nationally and politically in his campaign against social discrimination.

The previously discussed fictional works, with the exception of *Chikka* (Nirodi, 1962) and *Ramu, A Story of India* (Mehta, 1966), focus on life in the village. Whether the story is about the pleasures of childhood, the need for reform, or the validity of spiritual values,

it is the village setting to which the city-bred and city-educated authors turn. On the one hand, the village represents the elemental forces of nature, the innocence and purity of childhood, and the freedom from the corruption and materialism of the city, while, on the other hand, it is perceived as a symbol of India's backwardness and a deterrent to material and social progress.

A slight shift from these stereotypical novels can already be detected in the 1980s with Namjoshi's fantasy, *Aditi and the One-Eyed Monkey* (1986), which is a metaphor for the feminist qualities of love, peace, and sensitivity overcoming the negative attributes of aridity, selfishness, and destruction. Princess Aditi is treated like a possession when she is bartered in exchange for the dragon's promise not to bring drought to her kingdom, but she displays her intelligence and compassion by subduing the dragon and rendering him harmless.

TRADITIONAL LITERATURE

Traditional literature, like the fiction by Asian Indians, also aims to direct young readers to their cultural and spiritual roots in India. Just as Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese children's literature in the United States focuses on the retelling of folktales to display pride in their ethnic origins and culture, likewise, Asian Indians are also primarily concerned with preserving their culture, values, and way of life for the first generation of Indians born in America. Far from severing all emotional and cultural ties, physical departure from India has resulted in strengthening ethnic bonds that serve as strong cohesive forces in defining identity.

In the early part of this century, Mukerji published several collections of India's traditional literature like *Bunny, Hound and Clown* (1931), *The Master Monkey* (1932), *Hindu Fables for Little Children* (1929b), and *Rama: The Hero of India* (1930). It is significant to remember that Mukerji's works were directed at a Western audience; he wanted to introduce American children to the ancient lores of India and the wisdom that Indian parents quite naturally pass on to their children through storytelling. As is typical of Mukerji's style, his retellings of Indian epics, fables, trickster stories, legends, and creation myths also emphasize Hindu philosophy and moral lessons so that they can continue to mold character and eliminate materialism. Contemporary Indian authors also turn to the wisdom of Indian traditional literature as a popular source of children's stories. For instance, *Tales from India* (Upadhyay, 1971) is an entertaining retelling of ten fables from the *Panchatantra*. Each fable has a universal theme on the virtues of using common sense and being practical, yet it also evokes the atmosphere of India through careful attention to details. Gobhai's *Usha, the Mouse Maiden* (1969b) is

a variation of the familiar tale of a father trying to select a mighty husband for his mouse-maiden, while *The Legend of the Orange Princess* (1971) is a romantic story of transformation, selfless love, and separation. Through his eloquent prose and brilliant illustrations, Gobhai provides details of Indian scenery as well as portraying characters and their emotions with sensitivity and tenderness.

Madhur Jaffrey's collection of folktales in *Seasons of Splendour* (1985) is a unique blend of autobiography, storytelling, and descriptions of festivals and rituals. The book is structured around the various phases of the lunar calendar and the seasonal and religious festivals and stories associated with them. Each section of the book narrates incidents and anecdotes from Jaffrey's childhood and provides the living connection between folklore and life in modern India. In narrating the activities of her extended family, Jaffrey demonstrates how daily life is enriched by traditional values. Her account is especially relevant to Indian children being raised in America because Jaffrey's modern family has successfully blended Indian and Western cultures. There is no discordant note in the children being sent to Catholic and Anglican schools in India and their barrister grandfather sipping whiskey sodas and playing bridge, while the women of the household keep alive their heritage by tending the deities in the prayer room, performing rituals, and reciting stories from Hindu mythology. For instance, during Dussehra, a festival celebrating the victory of good over evil which falls on the tenth day of the waxing moon around late September, Rama, seventh incarnation of God Vishnu and hero of the epic *Ramayana*, defeats Ravana, the demon king of Sri Lanka. The epic is recited every year in Jaffrey's household with unique details added as a result of frequent retelling. To symbolically recreate the defeat of Ravana and their rejection of evil, Jaffrey and her cousins make clay statues of Ravana, place them on the driveway, and then ride over them with their bicycles. On this day, weapons are also worshipped by the warrior caste, but since Jaffrey comes from an educated family of writers, her family places an assortment of pens, pencils, nibs, and ink in the prayer room to be blessed.

Jaffrey's childhood experiences illustrate how time-honored traditions can adapt to changing conditions. She writes: "We hardly understood the differences between East and West. We just assumed that someone's grand plan included all of us in it, with all our differing cultures" (Jaffrey, 1985, p. 8). Hence, the children just as naturally learn Shakespeare, Dickens, and Western nursery rhymes as they assimilate the Hindu rules of conduct for well-behaved men and women, loyalty and love between brothers and sisters, and qualities

that ensure domestic bliss and prosperity. As the seasons come full circle and the book draws to a close, Jaffrey concludes: "The cycle of stories will start again, some new ones to remind us that we do not know everything, and some old ones to teach us that our values are constant. The world will be different next year. But it will also be the same" (p. 124).

Asian Indians take pride in their ancient culture a step further than do Chinese and Japanese writers in America. India's oral tradition is also expressed through the devotional tale, which emphasizes spiritual knowledge, successful moral living, and commitment to one's religion. Although prescriptive in nature, the devotional tale directly addresses the needs of Indian children growing up in America. In his foreword to *Yaksha Prashna* (Srinivasan, 1984), Swami Satchidananda states that Indians should not forsake their noble heritage because material success does not assure inner happiness, and: "If we really care about our children, we will take the time to educate them properly. They must learn moral and ethical values, as well as the eternal spiritual truths revealed by our saints, sages and scriptures of yore" (p. 1). The International Yoga Society of Miami promotes universal love and spiritual life through classes on Yoga, Vedanta, and *Upanishads*. Swami Jyotir Maya Nanda illustrates his philosophical discourses with moral tales that have been collected in *Yoga Stories and Parables* (1976) and *Yoga Mystic Stories and Parables* (1974). Swamiji's succinct and unadorned prose focuses on the action and emotional conflict in each story and the "victory of the human spirit over despair and defeat" (Jyotir Maya Nanda, 1974, p. iii). In Santa Cruz, California, Baba Hari Dass (1980), a yogi who has dedicated his life to the education and welfare of children, publishes books on folklore and yoga as a means to a healthy physical, mental, and spiritual life. For instance, through characters and events that young children can relate to, the stories in *Mystic Monkey* (1984) raise philosophic questions on birth and death, the transcendental quest for god, Karma, and performing one's dharma.

Similarly, the picture books published by Bala Books on the Krishna incarnation of God Vishnu, though not exclusively aimed at an Indian audience, reinforce the commitment of the younger generation to their Vedic heritage and Sanskrit scriptures. *A Gift of Love* (D-asa & D-asi, 1982), which is based on the tenth canto of the Vedic text, *Bhagavata Purana*, narrates an episode from the enduring friendship between Krishna and the poor brahmin, Sudama. The story symbolizes the devotion of the faithful and renunciation of material pleasures. *Krishna, Master of All Mystics* (Greene, 1981) and *Agha the Terrible Demon* (Wilson, 1977) narrate exploits from the childhood of Krishna when he was a cowherd in Vrindavan.

Despite the fun and mischief, Krishna is fully aware of his divinity, and he employs his mystic powers to protect the innocent and punish evildoers.

A. V. Srinivasan, who is active in the Indian community's efforts to transmit Hindu culture to the younger generation born in America, has published *Yaksha Prashna* (1984) which is a translation of a group of riddles from the Sanskrit epic, *Mahabharata*. Through these riddles, the Yaksha, a heavenly being, tests the virtue, self-discipline, and leadership skills of his son, Yudhisthira, the Pandava hero, and also tests his readiness to defeat the evil Kauravas. Although intended to inculcate values based on ancient Hindu thought and teachings, Srinivasan has selected only those questions and answers that have universal applicability. Through a thematic arrangement of the riddles pertaining to ethical, social, religious, and personal issues, Srinivasan poses the fundamental questions: What are the qualities of an admirable person? What is dharma? What is happiness and how can one achieve it? Personal character is stressed for all human beings as a guide for success and happiness. The qualities conducive to happiness are a serene and quiet mind, simplicity, kindness to all, and renunciation of desire. Some of the negative forces that prevent mental illumination and true relationships are ignorance, pride, greed, attachment to material possessions, hypocrisy, power, and fruits of action.

Srinivasan also provides a brief summary and commentary on each set of questions and answers to generate discourse, stimulate philosophic inquiry, and encourage Indian children to apply these maxims to their lives. Since the *Vedas* are complex and the truth of dharma mysteriously hidden, Srinivasan suggests that one should follow the examples of good souls like Yudhisthira and Mahatma Gandhi who have successfully upheld dharma. In short, *Yaksha Prashna* has to be read and understood in reference to one's own conduct or the examples set by others. In addition to inculcating Hindu values such as loyalty and obedience to one's parents, *Yaksha Prashna* also aims to provide children with emotional and psychological roots and confidence as they assimilate into both Indian and American cultures and fulfill their future social roles. In the introduction, Swami Saraswati Devyashram likens the test of the Yaksha to the difficulties that Hindu parents and their children in North America are encountering in their daily lives. "The battle between the Pandavas and Kauravas," writes Swamiji, "is within each of us, and we are being tested to see if we hold steadfast to Dharma" (p. 5).

The books of the publisher Veda Niketan, under the auspices of the Arya Samaj Foundation of North America, are specifically

aimed at imparting spiritual knowledge to Hindu children in order to educate them and develop their character. *Elementary Teachings of Hinduism* (Vedalankar, 1973) and *Basic Teachings of Hinduism* (Vedalankar, n. d.) are graded texts that explain the fundamental concepts of Hinduism such as the nature of Dharma, God, Prayer, principles of Hinduism, Yoga, Yagna and Sanskara, Vedic scriptures, and Law of Action (Karma). Each concept is first explained and then illustrated either with a story from the Sanskrit epics or with legends associated with Krishna, Buddha, or the saints. Furthermore, brief biographies of Hindu reformers like Swami Dayanand, Swami Shankaracharya, Swami Vivekananda, and Mahatama Gandhi embody the practical and experiential dimensions of Hindu religion. Both primers are intended to prepare youth to understand the concepts elaborated in the basic Hindu scriptures *Vedas*, *Bhagwad Gita*, and *Upanishads* at a more profound and philosophic level. The Arya Samaj, which was established in 1875 by Swami Dayanand, is engaged in spreading the true knowledge of Hindu dharma as contained in the *Vedas*, and it rejects the beliefs and practices that later became associated with Hinduism such as untouchability, caste system, child marriage, polygamy, and unequal status of women. This is part of a worldwide movement to propagate Hinduism and to effect social change.

Each of these Hindu denominations engaged in transmitting the spiritual heritage of India to the younger generation emphasizes the ecumenical spirit of Hinduism and states that its goal is not exclusivity but the combined task of all Americans to achieve universal love, peace, and unity. Steve Rosen (1985), associate editor of Bala Books, states: "Ultimately what is being fought for is more than just a literary tradition: it is a way of seeing the world" (n.p.).

Similarly, Buddhist teachings are being preserved through the publications of the Buddhist Foundation in Washington, D.C. and the Jataka Tales Series by Dharma Press in California. Each Jataka tale is a retelling of a birth story in which Buddha is reincarnated in various forms. Whether he is reborn as a woodpecker, buffalo, bird, fish, deer, or human, Buddha's actions are truly selfless and noble, and, no matter how he is treated, he continues to bring joy and happiness to others. These fables convey fundamental insights into human nature and the relationship between what people do and what happens to them (Karma). Through these simple stories, the nature of happiness for individuals and communities, the qualities of a leader, hospitality toward guests, bonds of friendship, power of truth and honest actions, and nonviolence are discussed. The Jatakas teach that one should love and respect all living things because only positive actions guarantee good results and motivate good

behavior in others. Of the numerous tales in this series, *Great Gift and the Wish-Fulfilling Gem* (Mipham, 1986) is clearly a metaphor for the heroic trials that Buddha endured to relieve the sorrow of the world. Great Gift goes on an epic journey to seek the wish-fulfilling gem that will satisfy the material needs of his people. Then, Buddha-like, he teaches them how to be happy and live together in harmony.

For Muslim children from India and other South Asian countries, there are several mosques and organizations in North America that import and publish religious books and hold classes on Islamiat, Urdu, and Arabic. Muslim children read stories and biographies that inculcate devotion to Allah, love for Prophet Muhammad, and the qualities of kindness, truthfulness, forgiveness, and piety. *The Guiding Crescent: Muslim Stories for Children* (Iqbal, 1977) narrates events from the lives of the prophets, caliphs, and heroes of Islam and emphasizes the willingness of Muslims to abide by the strict beliefs established by Prophet Muhammad. *The Birth of the Prophet* (Alsaahhaar, 1976) emphasizes the divine mission of Prophet Muhammad by narrating the prophecies and legends surrounding his birth, while *Stories of Some of the Prophets* (Hashim, 1974) traces the history and development of Islam through short biographies of the various prophets of the Old Testament. These biographies clearly testify to the close relationship between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. *Prophet Muhammad's Guidance for Children* (Abdul, 1980), in contrast, records the sayings and moral teachings of the prophet as they pertain to the everyday lives and problems of children. Islamic books, like their Hindu and Buddhist counterparts, serve the explicit purpose of providing their readers with moral guidance and religious education.

INFORMATIONAL BOOKS

While traditional and religious literature emphasizes culture and spirituality, informational books attempt to provide a balanced perspective by dispelling the misconceptions of India as a backward tradition-bound area of the world. The richness and variety of life in India are presented through a sociological investigation of topics like land and people, social and political organization, science and industry, clothing and daily habits, marriage customs, religious celebrations, and art and architecture. While a sense of respect for old values is evident, the necessity of meeting the challenges of the twentieth century is frankly discussed as in the novels of progress. Elaine Kim (1982) terms such books ambassadors of goodwill because their primary purpose is to win friends and understanding in the West by providing the Asian perspective. This approach is not unique

to Indian writers. Kim's study of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Filipino literature in America indicates that their early literature was also characterized by "efforts to bridge the gap between East and West and plead for tolerance by making euphemistic observations about the West on the one hand while explaining Asia in idealized terms on the other" (p. 24).

Modak, in *The Land and People of India* (1960), takes readers on a personal journey through India. After providing the geographical, economic, and political significance of major Indian cities, she traces the history and achievements of the various epochs from the Indus Valley Civilization and the Aryan invasion to Mughal and British rule to the present time. This cultural history of India is made all the more readable and interesting because of Modak's narrative style and selection of images and examples with which Western children can relate. In contrast, Thapar's *Introducing India* (1966) does not overwhelm young readers with historical facts and details; instead, it provides an intimate and personal experience of living in India through poetic descriptions of mountains and rivers and narration of the history and legends associated with the various regions. She also points out the influence of geography, history, and religion on the present customs in clothing, food habits, festivals and rituals, and village planning. Sarin, in *India: An Ancient Land, A New Nation* (1985), frankly addresses the problems facing modern India as well as giving sympathetic accounts of past and present achievements. She presents the richly textured life of Indians by inviting readers to share the warmth of family ties, the magic and fun of celebrations, and the oral traditions and values that enrich daily life. Finally, Raman's *India* (1972), while it provides similar information on India, is exceptional because, far from imparting knowledge to a passive audience, it demands active intellectual involvement by forcing readers to analyze and interpret the text, photographs, and charts.

In addition to these general books, there are others that provide information on specific topics. In *Getting to Know the River Ganges* (Soni, 1964), India's past achievements and glory, its present democracy and industrialization, and its future hopes are organized around the passage of the Ganges from the Himalayas to the Bay of Bengal. Soni takes readers on an imaginary *yatra* (pilgrimage) and eloquently describes the river as the center of religious, economic, and social activity for the millions of people who live on her banks. The legend associated with Mother Ganga is narrated to explain the reverence that Hindus feel for this holy river. Bani Shorter's *India's Children* (1960) and Sumena Chandavarkar's *Children of India* (1971) introduce Western readers to Indian children from diverse cultural,

ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Both books go beyond factual biographical details by narrating important events from an Indian child's perspective. Childhood is a time of enjoyment, curiosity, and fun for the privileged as well as the poor. Shorter, an American author who has lived in India, gives a complete, yet sensitive, picture of life in Indian villages through the stories of eleven boys and girls in *India's Children*. There is no attempt to hide or gloss over the problems of untouchability or poverty; rather, Shorter describes the strong role of the mother, the adolescents' preparation for fulfilling their roles as adult members of the family and village community, and the changes in traditional village life due to technology and village uplift programs. Both Shorter and Chandavarkar paint a hopeful picture of India's future and the ability of its young to shoulder the responsibilities of building a strong nation.

Bagai's *The East Indians and the Pakistanis in America* (1972) is the only children's book that discusses Asian Indians in America. It provides a thorough historical, political, economic, and social account of the migration of Indians to the West Coast in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Bagai also outlines the continual exchange of ideas between India and America and the specific contributions of Indians and Pakistanis to American society today.

CONCLUSION

This discussion of children's literature by Asian Indians clearly indicates that the Indian social identity is still perceived as foreigners. Their writings reflect a strong preference for themes that reaffirm cultural ties with India because of an overwhelming sense of exile and nostalgia and a desire to portray the Indian situation in the best possible light. While devotional or religious books continue to be popular in children's publishing, there has been a sharp decline in the publication of fictional works in the 1980s. Since Indians are now fairly well established in this country, this decline in publishing could indicate that Indian authors are reevaluating their position in America and trying to find a new literary voice. A shift in perspective can already be detected in the efforts of the Indian community to form a collective political voice to fight growing racial violence against Indians, especially the "Dot Buster" and "Lazy Boys" gangs in New Jersey, discrimination against foreign medical graduates, anti-Asian admission policies in Ivy League institutions, and the new *Immigration Bill*. Turning to the example of the Indian community in the United Kingdom, where Indians, as former British subjects, have a longer tradition, Indian authors have already become visible in the field of children's literature. In *Sumitra's Story* (1982),

Rukshana Smith poignantly portrays a young girl's confusion as she is poised between her Indian and British identities; Farrukh Dhondy, in *East End At Your Feet* (1976), describes the racist attacks against South Asians; and Manju Aggarwal (1984, 1985a, 1985b), in a series of books, describes how South Asian immigrants have successfully maintained their religious practices in Britain.

In the United States, with the filming of movies like *Mississippi Masala* (1992), which depicts an interracial friendship between an Indian girl and an Afro-American male; the publication of Bharati Mukherjee's (1988) award winning book, *The Middleman and Other Stories* about Indian immigrants in America; and the contributions of Indian women like Meena Alexander, Chitra Divakaruni, Arun Mukherjee, Rashmi Luthra, and Kartar Dhillon to anthologies of Asian American women writers, adult authors, instead of nostalgically looking back to their roots in India for self-definition, have started to make the transition from Indian to Asian American. It is hoped that children's writers will follow the trend being established by adult authors by describing the rich experiences of Asian Indians in America. The stories of the first wave of Indians in California—as workers on the railroad, in lumber mills, and in lettuce fields; as victims of racist attacks; as members of the revolutionary Ghadr Party against British imperialism; as “Mexican-Hindus,” the children of Sikh fathers and Mexican mothers; and as successful gentlemen farmers in the Imperial Valley—need to be told. Children's literature also needs to make visible the hopes and joys, the sense of dislocation and social adjustment, the internal conflicts and loneliness, and the crucial decisions in child raising that the new wave of immigrants has experienced. As the first generation of Indians born in America after 1965 comes of age, children's stories also need to voice their unique situation—the confusion arising from conforming to their parents' culture at home and American culture at school, parental restrictions against dating and marrying non-Indians, and identity conflicts arising from differences in physical appearance, customs, and value systems. These stories need to be told, these voices need to be heard if children's literature is to adequately portray the cultural mosaic of American society.

NOTES

¹ For an analysis of books about India published by Western authors, refer to the introduction of this author's annotated bibliography of the children's literature of the Indian subcontinent (Greenwood Press, 1991).

² Over 50 percent of Indian laborers in America in 1909 were already married in India (Takaki, 1989, p. 308); only seven pioneering Indian women were able to join their husbands before World War I (Bagai, 1972, p. 24).

³. Statistics indicate that between 1913 and 1946, 47 percent of the marriages of Asian Indians in America were to Mexican women in California, and their children were nicknamed "Mexican-Hindus" (Takaki, 1989, p. 310).

⁴. Mukerji's autobiography gives a candid account of the author's life as an upper-caste brahmin boy in India and his experiences at Berkeley, where he had to perform menial tasks and work as a farm hand in order to survive. By 1912, he had rejected Western materialism and industrialization as a solution to the problems of India and had turned to Hindu culture as an inspiration for his children's stories.

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