Children literature in India is going lit with bold, diverse themes

Indian authors are not shying away from exploring themes like death, adoption, climate change, communal divide and more

By Shubhangi Shah

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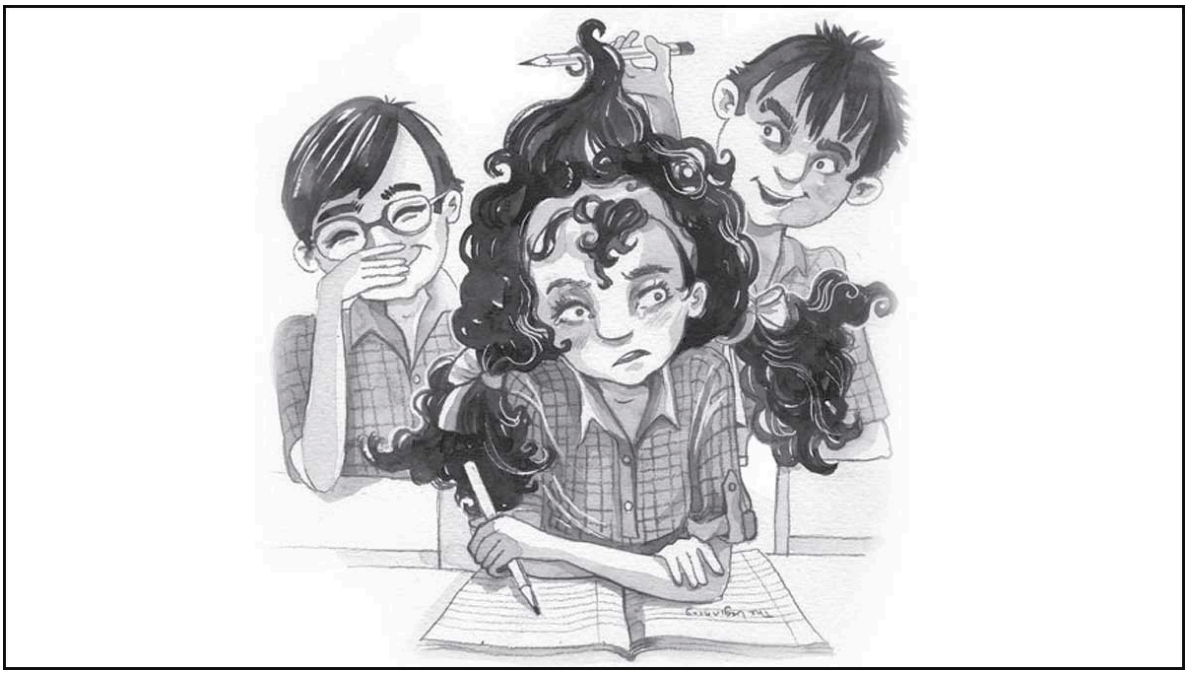
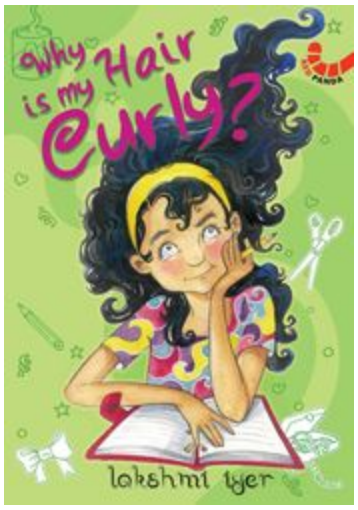


Avantika, 10, lives with her *amma, appa* and younger brother Avnish in Chennai. While her parents and brother have smooth, straight hair, Avantika struggles with her curly, frizzy, untamed mane. She is teasingly called Medusa, the Greek mythic character who had live snakes for hair. Whenever she feels disliked, Avantika wonders: “Was it because of her hair that stood out like the *rakshashis*’ in Amar Chitra Katha?” Despite this, Avantika doesn’t

want to get her hair cut short. They are her only link to her birth mother, who, she believes, has hair like hers. Avantika is an adopted child. This is the premise of *Why Is My Hair Curly?* by Lakshmi Iyer, published by Red Panda, the children's imprint of Westland Books.




Lakshmi Iyer

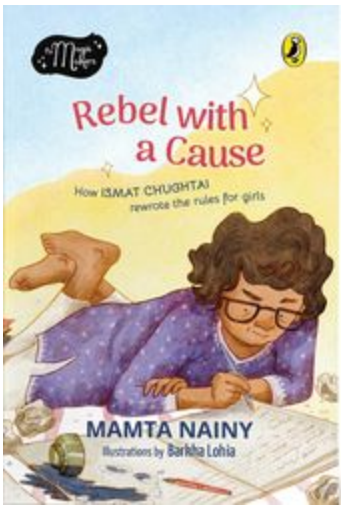
For long, children's books available in India were largely those written by western authors, about white children having fun and adventure. The worlds created by the likes of Enid Blyton and Roald Dahl, although fascinating, were unrelatable for the gully cricket-playing Indian kids who wouldn't know camping. Then came the likes of Ruskin Bond and Sudha Murty, who wrote stories that were more relatable to Indian children. Now, Indian publishing is witnessing another change in the kid-lit space as more authors are exploring bold, diverse themes that would otherwise be considered heavy-duty for young readers. Everything from disability, communalism and gender identity to relationships, emotions and climate change are on the table.

"There is a palpable shift in the themes being explored by children's authors in India over the last couple of years. What was an ongoing trend in the west is now noticeable in children's books being published in India," says Tina Narang, executive publisher at HarperCollins for children's books. "It is an accepted fact that children do like to see themselves in the stories they read, to identify with the milieu, with the protagonist and the circumstances from which the stories arise. It is also true that children today lead complex lives, not just in the number of distractions that surround them but also in the greater variety of experiences and the exposure to a very diverse world. The fact that authors have understood the need to provide contemporary stories that children in today's day and age would identify with seems to be a natural progression."

> We base our identities on the things we cannot have and rarely look inward to own up to the strengths we already possess. This became the core idea for Why Is My Hair Curly? - Lakshmi Iyer, author

Seconding that, Sudeshna Shome Ghosh, executive publisher and head of children's books at Speaking Tiger, adds, "Ideas about anxiety, mental health, factors that impact relationships between friends and family, environmental concerns—these all connect with the readers. Among our titles, books like *A Cloud Called Bhura* on climate change, *Loki Takes Guard* on gender, *Children of the Hidden Land* on communalism, and *Kungfu Aunty versus Garbage Monsters* on environment and pollution have all been well-received, both critically and commercially."

From emotions to identity



Bharthi is an unconventional name for a boy. Bharthi, the protagonist in Vibha Batra's *Kolam Kanna*, published by Penguin Random House, loves to draw, especially *kolams*—a flour drawing done outside south Indian homes. He wants to participate in the *kolam*-making competition at a society where he plays with friends every day, and where his parents work as helpers. However, Bharthi is told that a place he strongly associates with isn't his place even for something as simple as a small contest. This is a story of a young boy's fight and perseverance. At the same time, it is also a story of inequality and how boys can also fall victims to misogynistic mindsets, where cricket is for boys and painting for girls.

Then there is *Summers With Dadu* by Aprajita Ramsagar Singh, published by Tota Books, the children's imprint acquired by Speaking Tiger. It tells the story of a young Anand who waits all year to go to his favourite place—his grandfather's house—during summers. There would be excitement over mango trees, treasure hunts, sleeping under the stars and identifying all the stars with Dadu. However, that changes. "Can there be a Dadu's house without Dadu?" wonders Anand.

Singh tells THE WEEK that when she entered the world of children's books through the lens of a parent, she noticed a void around books that dealt with difficult life experiences like death. "As I spoke to fellow parents and educators and did my own research, I realised parents were uncomfortable talking about these difficult emotions as they feared 'not knowing what to say'," she says. And here is where she found a space where sorrow could be expressed gently.


Mamta Nainy

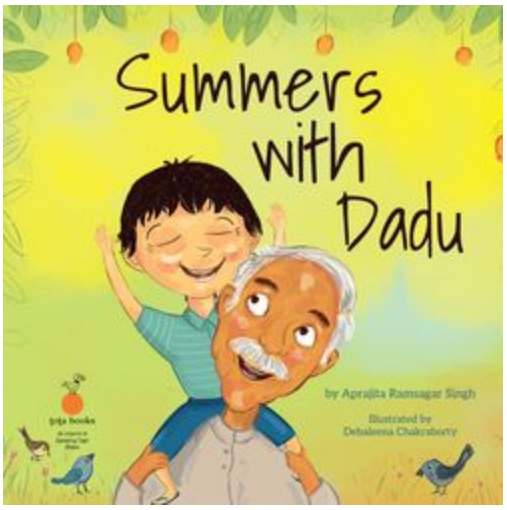
For Iyer, it was more about "what I would want to read if I were a middle grade child". While growing up, books were her window to the world, but she realised that those books had little diversity of thought or characters. So she drew inspiration from her own experience. "As a child who grew up in Madras (now Chennai), my hair was frizzy and it would form a halo around my head," she recalls. "No amount of oil or brushing helped keep it down. I would look at all my friends with straight hair with envy. Then, I realised that like everything else, the hair was a metaphor for the things we crave for. We base our identities on the things we cannot have and rarely look inward to own up to the strengths we already possess. This became the core idea for *Why Is My Hair Curly?*"

On adding further depth by incorporating the theme of adoption, Iyer again turned inward. “Adoption and, in particular, adoptee stories that I read seemed to latch on to gratitude and saviourism in ways that made me uncomfortable,” she says. “I thought a lot about writing from an adoptee point of view, given I am not an adoptee but an adoptive parent. I put myself in the shoes of my children and tried to imagine the world through their eyes. This, in turn, led me to use the adoption thread as part of the narrative to then tie it into the notion of identity as being comfortable in one’s own skin.”

> “With Ismat Chughtai, I was drawn first to her spirit—her wit, her sharpness, her refusal to be boxed in. The more I read, the more I realised how naturally themes of gender, voice and resistance were woven into her life. —Mamta Nainy, author, Rebel With a Cause: How Ismat Chughtai Rewrote the Rules for Girls”

I Am So Much More Than The Colour Of My Skin by Divya Thomas, published by HarperCollins, is another book that explores the themes of appearance and identity. Exploring the difficult subject of religious polarisation is Savie Karnel’s *The Nameless God*, by Red Panda, which showcases how even kids are not insulated from religious divide and communalism.

That doesn’t mean that books on such topics are heavy and depressing, says Ghosh from Speaking Tiger. “Sometimes they are written as wonderful adventures or mysteries, and through them a number of topics are discussed,” she says. “From our list, we have three books by Mallika Ravikumar in the M4 Mystery series: *The Case of the Vanishing Gods*, *The Case of the Missing Turtles* and *The Case of the Mysterious Witches*. In all of these, through mysteries about antique smuggling, poaching and land grabbing, the author has talked about issues of caste, class and gender in a very frank manner, without talking down to her reader in any way, anticipating their questions and incorporating those in the stories.”



Writers are also taking interesting historical-fiction detours to explore themes such as caste discrimination and gender inequality. For example, *Baloo's Big Win* by Mamta Nainy, published by Penguin Random House India, celebrates the life of Palwankar Baloo, a 19th century cricketer from Maharashtra who became a dalit sports icon."Does anyone really win when not everyone gets to play?" the book explores.

"My intent behind writing *Baloo's Big Win* was to raise awareness about the injustices of the country's caste system and reposition caste in childhood to bring the experience of caste to younger readers for whom it might be invisible," says Nainy. "Their families might even be practising it in the guise of tradition or culture, but they are unlikely to have understood that this is what it is. I want young readers to know that the world is bigger than they know it to be."


Aprajita Ramsagar Singh

In *Rebel With a Cause: How Ismat Chughtai Rewrote the Rules for Girls*, Nainy takes you through the life of a young Chughtai, who questioned everything from why her abba went to work and ammi didn't, and why she can't learn to ride a horse like her brothers.

"With Ismat Chughtai, I was drawn first to her spirit—her wit, her sharpness, her refusal to be boxed in. The more I read, the more I realised how naturally themes of gender, voice and resistance were woven into her life," says Nainy. "More broadly, with this series, I wanted to explore the diverse ways of being and becoming. Beneath the biographical particulars, the larger aim was to bring out narratives that focus on the early childhood of these personalities, before they became iconic."

Davina Finds her Vowels is another interesting title by Elizabeth Marie Keyton, published by AdiDev Press, which introduces Malayalam vowels to toddlers through a seek-and-find story.

> “As I spoke to fellow parents and educators and did my own research, I realised parents were uncomfortable talking about difficult emotions as they feared ‘not knowing what to say'. - Aprajita Ramsagar Singh, author, Summers With Dadu”

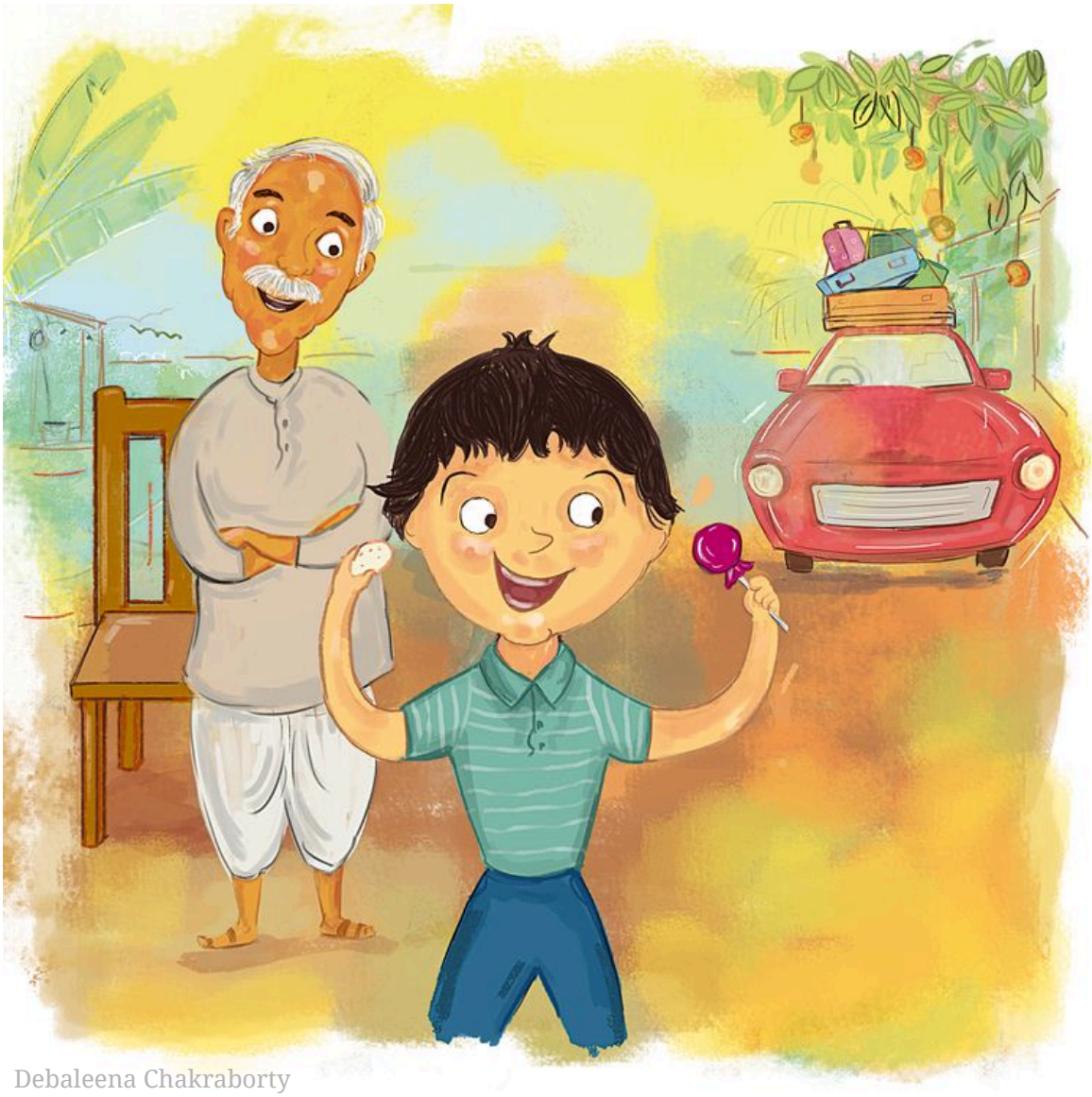
It is a positive trend whose time had come. “As a child, I don’t recollect reading many or any Indian authors and it was all Eric Carle, Enid Blyton and Crockett Johnson et al. So to be now spoiled with choice with books by Niyatee Sharma, Vaishali B.K., Nandini Nayar, Shobha Viswanath, Chitra Soundar, Janaki Sabesh, Richa Jha and others is encouraging. I do feel both publishers and authors are getting more courageous in telling stories. Moving from didactic storytelling, I see an emerging trend of books being less prescriptive,” says Singh, the author of *Summers with Dadu*. “Stories are a great way to inculcate an understanding of complex ideas without making children feel talked down to,” adds Chitwan Mittal, founder and editorial director, AdiDev Press.

Is there a market?

But does the market also support this trend, especially when parents, teachers, book stores and libraries can become gate-keepers and determine what is appropriate for a kid to read? “Parents and educators are beginning to understand the need for stories that tackle these complex themes,” says Narang. “For younger and middle (grade) readers, it is largely parents and educators who determine what their child will read, so it is heartening to see a greater acceptance for such stories.”

What’s next?

According to Narang, publishers “are seeing pitches and manuscripts with more diverse characters, and those that challenge gender stereotypes, have LGBTQ themes, and include socially relevant issues”. Writers, too, are upbeat about the trend. “My goal is to next break down taboo topics (race, sexuality, politics) for our little ones and make it easy to read and talk about,” says Iyer. Another area she wishes to see more books on is diaspora. “We need to shift from stereotypical representation of the desi experience and account for the reality that is yet to be mirrored in art,” she says. Singh, meanwhile, wishes



Debaleena Chakraborty

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for more diversity in terms of languages. “I still feel there is a big space for work here, especially in local languages. I hope we can get more books in

Hindi, Bhojpuri, Bengali, Tamil and so on," she says.

In the end, stories matter in every age and more so in one's initial stages of life. "I believe one of the best ways to introduce children to individuality, nonconformity and diversity is through stories," says Nainy. "They notice, they feel and they ask big questions. They deserve books that respect their intelligence, curiosity and emotional depth."