

[Children's Books Part 3](#)

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Children's Books Part 3

Writing for Kids? The First Feat Is Fighting Off Those Who Tell Us Not To

Parts One and Two of our three-part series on Hindu children's books revealed they don't really exist—at least in any significant quantity or quality. For this condition, some blame head-in-the-hole, profit-hungry publishers who safely print British nursery rhymes. Others indict the nation's great writers who subvert their talent into churning out high-fat, low-sat (truth) pulp fiction. Others convict Hindu parents, oddly programmed to buy anything for their kids except religious books. Part Three is a little more cheery with a recount of one mother who bucked all opposition and produced a delightfully illustrated, intelligently written series about an immigrant Hindu family in the USA. Also included is a sobering report on children's books in Tamil.

By Mona Vijaykar, California

Years back I wrote and illustrated a series of books for children. I called them The Vee Family. This was my first attempt at publishing. With the exception of my family and a few dear souls, most people tried to discourage me. Not just publishers. Of course, I was writing about preserving Indianness and Hindu values in a community more eager to shed it.

I came to America from India after my marriage and experienced the cultural shock most of us run into after uprooting from our homeland. However, this was not enough to catalyze me to put pen to paper. In due course, I became a mother of two boys and began to notice the low self-esteem young Indian Amerikids experience here who, caught between two cultures, feel confused. Initially, they opt to shun all Indianness and try to conform with the lifestyle and habits of American kids. They quickly Americanize their names—Maheshwari to Mary, Sujata to Sue and Rajan to John.

Their school books make the matter worse. Most are still Eurocentric, hardly reflecting the large Asian population in the USA. Books and encyclopedias present a superficial and unfair perspective of non-Western peoples. Picture books and children's literature project stereotypical images of India-misery and poverty of rural India, and dwell on folkloric religious subjects totally unrelated to daily Hindu life.

Identity-wise, Indian kids also get confused with Native Americans (descendants of the 5 million who inhabited North Americas before Columbus arrived) who are still often called "Indians." This is a complete disregard to the burgeoning population (over one million) of us real Indians, and also disrespectful of the indigenous tribes who want to be called "Native Americans," not "Indians."

Imagine my shock when my son was asked by his teacher to color the picture of an Indian woman that looked like a cross between an Arab and a Sri Lankan fisherwoman with a bindi, lungi and a turkish veil! The school had been using this ludicrous illustration for years!

Then, the nagging term "Third World." I am sure my own sons experience only humiliation and resentment when they read and hear they are from the "Third World." "Third-class" they figure.

And even I have had a trying time. On several occasions I have been made rudely aware by Americans that they think my religion is some form of pagan worship. As I wrote in one of my books, one day in a supermarket, a lady told me, "Go back home." It hurt. I included the experience in one of my books and scripted a mom explaining to her son, "What if all Americans went back where they came from? There would be no one here except the Native Americans. We all came here from somewhere else."

And my Indian dress in the supermarket never fails to attract a few disapproving arched-eyebrows. The subtle bigotry among educated people surprised me. Then there was the day when I overheard an exchange between my son and a friend. His friend declared that Jesus Christ is the only God. My seven-year-old then eagerly talked about our temple and our Deities which his friend dismissed as "not real."

Similarly, a dear friend invited me to her church service that included a sermon and presentation on India. As we quietly settled in the pews, I pointed to Jesus Christ and explained the Hindu concept of God being in many forms to my son. Just then my friend nudged my shoulder, reminding me not to mention my religion during the presentation. Our friendship made me suppress my indignation. Later I felt a growing sense of anger within for not having asserted my religion, and that it is the basis of my culture.

Most upsetting though was becoming aware of the total apathy amongst Indian parents (even me sometimes) who let abuses, misrepresentations and distortions go uncorrected. "Asian servility" I guess.

All this made me determined that it was my duty, no one else's, that my children grow up with noble, proud impressions of their religion and heritage. I started by putting together reference books on India which slowly evolved into a series of picture books, The Vee Family. I had an excellent training in visual communication arts which helped. Right from the beginning, I resolved that whatever I did to strengthen my children's Indian and Hindu pride, I would not accomplish at the cost of running down other cultures. My parents never dwelled on the differences between Muslim, Sikh and Christian. In fact, we sometimes shared in the religious celebrations of our non-Hindu friends. Some of my best memories are those of my friends and I praying nervously at the church of the Virgin Mary on the day before the exams.

Instead of drawing sharp boundaries, I would draw parallels of universally held beliefs among the different religions so Hindu children could learn first a sense of global brotherhood/sisterhood. Differences could be shown, of course, with the teaching that differences are fine. Just like skin color. Respect and be tolerant of these differences. My hard-line would be that all the illustrations and text would endorse the acceptance of Indian food, dress and customs right in the midst of the "American scene!"

Thank God for My Husband

This project was absolutely impossible without my husband's support. Writing these books consumed me-at times possessed me. As publishing bills kept growing,

I don't know how he stood by me. Memories of those days are a blur of emotions-enthusiastic responses from friends who shared their own experiences through anecdotes of their child's painful disillusionments, candid suggestions from my five-year-old, all the annoying yet constructive criticisms from my husband, the patient doodlings of my two-year-old as he waited beside me at the copy center, the untiring efforts of my father writing to publishers and the serene look of pride on my mother's face as she watched me work late into many a night.

This was the rosy part. Listening to those who badgered me to forget about India, and hunting for a sympathetic publisher were not. I got so disturbed by publishers' demand for exotic storylines instead of real-life situations, I decided to self-publish the books in India. And did.

Though I thought I had really filled a crying need, the Indian community has been slow to buy the series. I think there is some block in the Indian psyche about buying books for kids that are not school textbooks. Maybe it will dislodge.

1995-Pulp in Pune

"Mama, why is Ganapati's head like an elephant's?" my five-year-old once asked me. I resisted the temptation to share the bizarre, but routinely told mythological tale. He deserved better, but what the "better" was even I didn't know.

Right now I am in Pune visiting family. The other day I went to check out what the big city stores offer as resources to explain Hinduism to children. With the increase in desktop publishing, there has been an explosion of children's literature. But in general, I found the books crammed with stories that confused rather than enlightened the young reader. The essential teachings of Hinduism are lost in absurd translations of mythological stories about divine curses used to justify sinful actions of its characters or stories of Gods wreaking wrath upon mortals who disobey them. Certainly not what I want my sons to learn. The unimaginative approach in literally interpreting Indian myths for children does not serve to clarify the moral direction offered in them. If the objective of religion is to guide us in our life, Hindu concepts and symbolisms must be decoded to be easily understood by the layman, kids and teens. As is, these books do Hinduism a disservice rather than help. Books should generate youthful interest in Hinduism rather than make them

want to shelve the subject until old age. In contrast, books on Christianity and Buddhism for children have contemporary stories they can relate to. Some books even have questions, crossword puzzles, quizzes and glossaries to help understand the story more thoroughly. I suggest children's writers buy some of them for ideas.

Sidebar: Excerpts from Mona's book, "Tom, Nick or Harry."

One day when Mumma Vee went to get Nikhil from school he looked sad and upset. On their way home, he asked, "Mumma, why do I have a different name? My friends call me Nik-kha-il! I wish my name was Tom, Nick or Harry, or something easy, he sobbed.

Later, a school teacher asked: "Hello Nick! Welcome to our school. Can we call you Nick?"

Nikhil looked up at her and politely said, "I'm not Nick. I'm Nikhil"

Finally Nikhil prays before sleep: "And please keep Daddy well and Mumma well and our family in India well...and thank you for the Ninja Turtle lunch box and thank you. I am so proud of my own special name Nikhil."

Sidebar: Tamil tomes for tots?

By Anandhi, Madras,

Do good children's books exist in the Tamil language? Very few. The first reason is that TV and movies are stealing children's prime time. "No demand, no supply" is the superficial excuse. Other reasons are less obvious. For instance, writing for children in Tamil is more difficult than in English. Spoken Tamil is different from written Tamil. If a story is written as we speak, grammatically it isn't correct. So the

style of writing for children becomes artificial. The charm of narrating a story is lost.

Another important reason is that parents don't encourage their offspring to buy Tamil books. Managing director of Saiva Siddhantha Publishing Society (which also publishes children's books) Muthukumaraswamy says, "Even when children want to buy a Tamil book, parents dissuade them. They tell their child to choose an English title." Urban children of Tamil Nadu do not start learning their mother tongue first. The nursery schools in Madras and all the big towns begin teaching in English and parents send their children to English medium schools. The reason? English is a world language. Also, young parents today like the Western pseudoculture seen on cable TV. It is smart and fashionable to talk in English and dress in Western style. A teenager wearing the traditional dhoti in school or college would be ostracized. If he wore a rudraksha bead pendant, he would be considered queer in the head.

In another two decades the learned people of Tamil Nadu will not be able to appreciate Kamban, the great poet who wrote the Ramayana in Tamil, or Valluvar who wrote the Tirukural or all the Saivite and Vaishnavite literature that abounds in Tamil. Only ten percent of the Tamil-speaking upper and lower middle class people buy children's books in Tamil.

Children's book publishers rarely print more than 1,200 copies of a new title. Of that, the Directorate of Public Libraries of Tamil Nadu buys 500 copies. In fact, it is because of this single library sale that children's books are published at all! The remaining books have to be stored for about six years while slowly sold. When ten volumes of Ancient Tales of South India were published for children, it took seven years to sell them. The Tamizh Valarchi Kazhagam published a children's encyclopedia in Tamil in color with grants from the state government and UNESCO. The ten volumes, priced at just Rs10 each, could not be sold. In ten years only 3,000 sets were sold.

My solution to this problem is that retired people buy a minimum of 200 books and open home libraries for the children of their area.