

Writing and publishing children's books in Nepal

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New dimensions of children's literature

Development of information and communication technologies and proliferation of borderless commercial media put together have exposed Nepali children, living in urban areas, to different kinds of media – from radio and television to the Internet. Because children have easy access and many choices their book reading habit is eroding and they are tempted to harmful media. Therefore concerns and demands for appropriate and safe media for children have been rising from parents and teachers. They want to change the media consumption trend. Children's literature/books can be the best means to divert them from this tendency and foster reading habits in children. Hence the writing and publication of the children books is entering into a new dimension which is an encouraging sign for the society and nation at large.

Every child, no matter how young or old, can easily be encouraged to develop a relationship with books. The children's needs and aspirations change with the change in their age and it is important to understand each age-group's specific needs. Love with books and reading habit can be developed among the children if we provide them appropriate books. Right exposure is one that is given at a right time.

Do Nepali children get right book at right time/age? Do they have access to quality Nepali books, which are relevant to their age and the time they are living in, which are written for today rather than the classical stories of long long ago? Are children's books writers and publishers adequately aware of the children's need of the kind of literature which they can enjoy and learn some lesson? A brief study of the Nepali children's literature/books indicates that the situation is not satisfactory. Improving the quality and quantity of children books is a big challenge and an opportunity as well for writers, illustrators and publishers.

Nepali Children's Literature

The history of printed Nepalese Children Book begins with the publication of a text book called Gorkha Pahilo Kitab (Gorkha First Book) in 1892. After the establishment of the first formal school in 1901 the demand of text books in various subjects increased gradually. Establishment of the first state owned publishing house – Gorkha Bhasha Prakashini Samiti – in 1913 was the first institutional endeavor to address this demand. During the same period Nepali language children text books flourished in Darjeeling, a Northern Indian Hill District where Nepali speaking people are in majority. Similarly Varanasi, the Indian city which is well known for printing and publishing business, played an important role in publishing Nepali children books.¹

Series of endeavors and events like Workshop on Children's Literature Development in Nepal, organized by UNICEF in 1965, International Book Year 1972 and the International Children's Year 1979 felicitated the publication of children book and magazines and created an awareness regarding the importance of children literature for the development of children.

According to Mr. Pramod Pradhan, researcher of Nepali Children Literature, a total of 1280 titles of children's books were published till mid March 2008. This included fictions (337), poetry and songs (232), translations from other languages (283), picture

¹ Nepali Bal Sahitya ko Itihas (History of Nepali Children Literature): Written by Pramod Pradhan; Published by Bibek Sirjanshil Prakashan (second edition), 2004.

books and comics (178), novels (64), biographies (47), dramas (15), essays (15), , history (2), interview with children (1), dictionary (1), encyclopedia (1) and others .²

One Book for Ten Children!

From the beginning of printing children books in Nepal there is a trend of printing one thousand copies in one edition This trend continued for over a century and still it is continuing with some exception of a few publishing houses. It can be estimated that with that rate a little over 13,00,000 copies of books have been printed till March 2008. However, with the increase of child population, awareness level of the society, number of educational institutions and organizations dedicated to children's development, after 1990s, the number of titles and the average number of copies in single edition is increasing gradually. If we guess that 200 thousand copies of books were added after mid March 2008, we can assume that total number of books after the first publication of the children book in 1892, has reached about 15,00,000 copies, excluding school text books. Likewise, the population of children below 16 years, according to the National Planning Commission, constitutes 40.93 percent of the total population. If we include 18 year old children, according to international practice, the total number of children increases considerably, i.e. about half of the population of the country consists of children. If all the titles are available in the market, which is not possible, then the ratio looks like this: one Nepali children's book for ten children. This is an upsetting situation.

Filling the gap

Visits to some of the major book shops and interview with some children, parents and teachers indicate that the demand for children's books is increasing, and this demand is fulfilled by foreign books, published mainly in India in English and Hindi languages. Most of the parents and teachers are of the view that there is scarcity of quality children's books in Nepali language. It is estimated that the less than ten percent of Nepali books cover the children's books market of Nepal.

Picture books for young children are the most lacking area in Nepali children literature. Most of them are printed in two colors – black and white, except the cover page which are in four color. However, some publishing houses, like Room to Read have been publishing all color picture books ranging from 5000 to 15,000 copies per edition. Because of the quality of print and paper and other production costs the price of the picture books is quite high in relation to the income and purchasing capacity of the customers.

Story books with pictures are the most published children books in comparison to other genres. The target group of these books ranged from 6 years to young adults (18). The content/subject and story/plot of majority of these story books are mainly based on mythology and folk tales, teaching moral lessons.

The number of **poetry and rhyme/song books** looks high in comparison to other genres. However, their sale is not encouraging and English language rhyme books dominate the schools and the market.

Children's novels with based on mystery and science are popular in Nepali market, but Nepali novels are quite behind both in quantity and quality.

There is serious lack of **biographies** of Nepali personalities written in children-friendly style and language. Market is dominated by biographies of foreign personalities and such biographies have been published repeatedly.

Similarly the number of Nepali **children's drama** is also negligible (15). There is a demand for ready-to-play drama books.

² Nepali Balbangmaya Parichaya Kosh (Compendium of Nepali Children Literature): Written by Pramod Pradhan; Published by Martin Chautari, July, 2008.

The number of children's books of other genres such as **history** (2), **dictionary** and **encyclopedia** (2) are also lacking in Nepali children literature. Non-fiction/fact books, particularly on science and technology, are popular and in much demand. But Nepali writers and publishers have not been able to fulfill this demand. Fact books based originally on Nepal are rare. In this regard Nepali Children Encyclopedia (720 pages), published by NESCHIL in 2004 with the support of UNICEF is an outstanding achievement for Nepali children literature. However, it has to be updated and revised according to the changed situation of the country and the development in science and technology.

Translations from other languages occupy considerable part (283) in Nepali children literature. The range of language and country is not so wide. Most of the translation is done from English and Hindi, even though they were originally written in other languages. Such books often misrepresent the social and cultural issues. There are some Russian children books translated directly from Russian into Nepali. Translation from foreign language is limited mostly to folktales, fairytales and old children stories written by antiquated authors. Some of the renowned books like Alice in Wonderland and books of famous writers like Hans Christian Andersen have been translated and published repeatedly by different writers and publishers at different periods. Translation of the books of present day's authors who have captured today's children book market is almost non-existent.

Although there are more than one hundred languages/dialects spoken in Nepal, children's literature in **local languages** other than Nepali is almost nonexistent. There are very few children books in Newari, Tharu and Maithili languages.

To sum up Nepali society has lately started to realize the importance of children's books and the market is feeling the demand of various genres of children's literature. Producers are feeling the pressure of producing books of international quality. The pulse of children book market of Asian countries, including India, has not yet been felt in Nepal.

Children Magazines

Children magazines in Nepal are serving as a nursery for growing new writers of children's literature. The first children's magazine appeared in 1951 and about 80 titles of magazines have been published within this period. However at present there are less than a dozen magazines that appear in the market regularly. In addition to the monthly magazines some of the broad sheet national dailies bring out weekly supplements of children's pages and one of them has daily children column.

Although the children magazines are targeted to different age groups some features of the magazines are common. Almost all of them have cartoon strips and space for children writers. All of them are published in Nepali language.

Situation and trend of publishing children literatures

There are 200 publishing organizations³ listed in the compendium. However, less than twenty publishers are active in the children's book market. Following are the major publishing houses which have been publishing more than 5 children books per year: Ratna Pustak Bhandar, Bibek Sirjanshil Prakashan, Ekata Books, Sajha Prakashan, Room to Read, Bal Sansar, Rato Bangla, Himal Books Stall, Balkoseli Prakashan, Banita Prakashan, Bani Prakashan, Sunbird Prakashan, Jamko Prakashan etc. Publishers of other fields also have started publishing children books and more publishing houses are emerging, which indicates that children book market is flourishing in the country. Sale of children's books is increasing considerably since 1990s.

There are many stakeholders who are contributing to the children literature in Nepal, however, this paper is confined to the trend of writing and publication of children books. NGOs and INGOs working on various development sectors and different parts of

³ Nepali Balbangmaya Parichaya Kosh (Compendium of Nepali Children Literature): Written by Pramod Pradhan; Published by Martin Chautari, July, 2008.

the country tend to purchase children's book in bulk. Similarly, Room to Read, an international charity organization, purchases and supplies the books to schools and libraries in rural areas.

There are some non-profit, non commercial organizations and educational institutions which are dedicated to develop children literature. Among them Nepal Society for Children Literature (NESCHIL), Bal Sansar (Children's Literature Promotion Centre run by Himal Association), Room to Read, Child Workers in Nepal Concerned Centre (CWIN), Rato Bangla, Seto Gurans etc. are working for not only publication of children literature but also skill development of the writers and illustrators.

Problems related to production and market of Nepali children's books

Old tradition of story telling in the family has almost stopped in the society. Very few Nepali parents are conscious about the importance of 'out of text' books for their kids. Printing of most of the books is still limited to one thousand copies per edition. Children, particularly younger ones, like to read colorful books. But the production cost of such books is quite high in comparison to black and white page books with four colored cover. Colorful books cannot be cost effective unless they are produced in large number. But very few publishers, except Room to Read, are producing more than four thousand copies per edition,. Limited market causes limited production and high production cost and high price of books, affecting the purchasing capacity of the parents. Overcoming this vicious circle is one of the major challenges of Nepali children's book market.

Although there are many national and international organizations working for the development of children none of them have distinct policy, plan and program for the promotion of children literature. Their role is limited to buying children books in bulk and distributing them. While doing so they give least consideration to quality, content and standard of the books. Major parts of the Nepali children's books are purchased by bulk buyers.

Because there is no regulatory body to control and monitor the quality and market of children's books there is unhealthy competition among book publishers/sellers to supply books to bulk buyers (NGOs and INGOs). It has resulted in publication of sub-standard, low quality books and high price.

More than half of the children's book market is confined to Kathmandu valley. There are about 500 book shops that sell children book in the valley. Book sellers get much commission/profit from high priced Indian books and book shops do not profit much by selling low cost Nepali children's books. Hence quite a small number of book shops both in the valley and outside give priority to display and sell Nepali children's books.

Editing is an important part for the good quality books. But the writers and publishers do not give importance on editing. Writers take it as against their dignity while publishers take it as an extra and unnecessary expense/burden. Some of the publishers and writers opine that there are no efficient editors and sometimes, in the name of editing, they make mess of original writing. It is true that publishers cannot bear the cost of editing until the publication is limited to one or two thousand copies per edition. But it is also equally true that without investing on editing Nepali children's literature cannot improve and compete in the market.

Quality of translation from international children literature into Nepali is not up to standard. There are duplications, i.e. many translators and publisher have translated and published the same books, such as Alice in Wonderland and fairy tales of Hans C. Andersen. There is a tendency of translating old renowned authors' books. New books, which hit the market has rarely been translated.

There is no such organization in Nepal that regular study, or conduct research and monitor the quality and cost of children's literature. There is serious lack of unbiased review of children books in media. There is no reliable means that inform the

audience about the arrival of new children's books in the market and suggest or inspire the readers to read good books.

INGOs and NGOs purchase in bulk mainly the picture books, targeted to the younger children. Investment on books for middle level has not increased so much. There is lack of good quality non-fiction/fact books, particularly based on Nepali context and content.

There are various problems on printing regarding the availability of quality papers, good printing press and high printing cost. Likewise, unmanaged, unreliable and costly distribution system, due to underdeveloped transportation facility and difficult terrain; undermining copy right laws, piracy and improper business practices have hindered the development of publishing industry.

However, despite all these lacking, the demand of children's books is increasing along with the increase in the realization of responsibility of parents, teachers and society towards the children. Nepali children's book market seems to be in a leap forge stage.

Problems related to writers and manuscripts

Publishers have already started realizing this situation and they are looking for quality manuscripts and good writers of children's literature. But they are constantly facing acute shortage of original children books/manuscripts. Emerging situation demands professional and dedicated writers. However, there are very few professional writer who has been writing only for children and who has specialized in this field through either academic education or training. Older breeds of writers are still dominating the Nepali children's literature, and very few dedicated young writers are visible in the scene. The number of female writers that dominate the domain of children's literature in most of the developed societies is disappointing.

Studies, researches, observations, discussions and publications done by various organizations, including NESCHIL, articles published in national papers and journals written by researchers and writers regarding the quality and content of the Nepali children literature indicate that the main problem is in writing.

"The general tendency of children's book writers in Nepal,' observes Chudamani Bandhu, himself an author of children's literature, 'is to use it as 'guinea pig' write-ups to prepare themselves for serious writing.'

'But what can you expect from fancy writers who publish a book worth Rs 20 and hope for overnight success,' he questions pensively.

If these complaints are true, it is also equally true that they are only the tip of the iceberg. As we delve deep into Nepali children's literature, our literary richness becomes more and more apparent.

In fact, some of the most famous Nepali poets, from Lekhnath Poudyal and Laxmi Prasad Devkota to present day Madhav Prasad Ghimire, started their career with children's literature." ⁴

Punyasheel Gautam, children's author, observes, "Most of our children's literature is modeled in Panchatantra style. They're loaded with tons of moral lessons. Somehow, they always try to reinstate parental advice like brush your teeth, obey your elders, speak the truth and a thousand and one moral lessons that the children are already fed up of. Therefore, literature should provide a respite from the everyday reality instead of reinforcing it." ⁵

Kanak Mani Dixit, while agreeing with both of them, also holds that a subtle moral message wouldn't exactly hamper children from enjoying the story. Dixit opines

⁴ Here's looking at you, kid, By *Bhushita Vasistha*, The Kathmandu Post Daily 2007-09-14

⁵ Ibid

that we need more and better children's writers in Nepal, writing not just in Nepali and English, but in other mother tongues also.

"It's quite mandatory," he says, pointing to the need for children's writers. "We must groom the reading habit in our children. And this is best done when you catch them young." ⁶

Author Dominique Francon observes, "Children's literature has not quite flourished in Nepal. Drawing on mythologies like Ramayana and the Mahabharata, classics like Panchatantra and Jatak Katha, modern creative writing for children could have been very rich.

"Writing for children is more difficult than writing for adults. Nowhere is this more evident than in the matter of language.

"For a children's book to be meaningful, it must help the reader to develop morally, spiritually and socially. When children are able to identify themselves with the main character or characters in a story, it grips them. Schools are mushrooming, why are not the books?" ⁷

Writer Babu Ram Neupane, in his article 'No casual literatures for children, please!' observes, "Children's literature in Nepal is mostly casual. The writers write it only to try their hands at something different. The delicate minds are stormed with antiquated ideas and queer morals that do not represent the ethos of the age. We have miles to go to further the genuine causes of children's literature both at institutional and individual level. However, there are constraints of purchasing power and an unjustifiably snobbish outlook on the part of guardians while buying books. The preference of English books over Nepali ones has also hit the market hard. But there are nominal original English creations."

"The situation is not as hopeless as one might think. Quality in content is also palpable, and it is evidenced by an introduction of contemporary issues and novel subject matters of late. The number of children eager to book shops and exhibition has gone up significantly. This shows an upward mobility of reading culture among children. A Nepali book buying switch is also visible in the guardians and parents. Better days are ahead if the concerned actors push the government to formulate concrete policies and to allocate a certain amount of budget to kick start some programmes in this connection to provide platforms to the children to unleash their potentialities."⁸

"According to Sharada Adhikari (late), who was doing PhD in Children literature, there are around 400 writers who focus on children's literature. Adhikari informs: 'A host of such writers came after 2003. This has, however, taken a toll on the quality of writing. Many people are writing children's books simply because NGO's and INGOs have created a huge demand for such books.'" ⁹

"Ashesh Mall, a noted literary figure, blames this on the exploitation of writers. 'Even if a writer toils hard and produces good material, publishers are the ones to benefit from sales, while the writer remains unrewarded.'" ¹⁰

There are similar grievances of publishers and readers against the writers. Writers never bother to listen about the problems of publishers. Very few writers try to help the publishers to promote their books. Their objective is to fulfill their own motives rather than satisfy the readers,

and fulfill the need and expectations of the children. Most of them are satisfied with what they are writing. They rarely try to learn new ideas and styles and techniques. If Nepali writers take responsibility to create literature for children that relates to them,

⁶ Ibid

⁷ What hinders children literature? By Dominique Francon, The Kathmandu Post daily, 2008-04-26

⁸ No casual literatures for children, please! by Babu Ram Neupane, The Kathmandu Post daily, 2007-10-13

⁹ Children's Literature in great demand: Anjali Subedi, The Kathmandu Post daily, 2007-02-03

¹⁰ Ibid

which is for them and in a language that they understand it is sure that Nepali children's book industry will flourish and children will benefit at large. There is no doubt that children want to read. But it is now mainly up to the writers to bring quality children's books. Then comes the role of publishers, schools and the parents of giving children the high appropriate books at appropriate time.

Trainings and Workshops for Writers and Illustrators

Training and workshops for children's writers, which are regular activities in developed societies, are not common in Nepal. Many writers think that writing is a natural talent or god's gift rather than a craft that can be learnt. Hence, some of them take it as a matter of humiliation to participate in a writing workshop or learning from a book or an established/senior author.

However, the first workshop/seminar for the development of children literature was organized by UNICEF in 1965. NESCHIL has been organizing workshops for writers and illustrators for some year with the cooperation of Danish Writers Association and other organizations. Similarly, Room to Read and Balkoseli Publication also have organized workshops for writers and illustrators. But these initiatives are quite inadequate. It is high time that all the stakeholders of children literature, particularly the promoters and publishers, cooperate and contribute to develop and implement a time bound strategic plan and program to produce new breed of children literature writers, who can address the new demands and challenges

Conclusion:

Children litterateur, editor and publisher Mr. Shanta Das, who symbolizes Nepal's children's literature for his almost four decade long endeavor for the promotion of children literature in the country is quite hopeful regarding the development of Nepali children literature. According to him demand and concern for children literature has increased considerably and at the same time new writers are coming with the objectives of contributing to children literature. However, their level of dedication is different. Some of them see personal benefit and name in it while some have come with serious concern. This situation may continue for some time, may be three to five years and within this period some new and genius writers and products will emerge, Mr. Das is hopeful.¹¹

We are at the juncture of making new Nepal, where our future citizens can live, develop and contribute for the society and country. Their role and contribution depend on the education and conscience that we provide them. Literature is the best means to do that. In fact investment in children literature is, in essence, investment for the nation. Therefore it is the duty and responsibility of every stakeholder of children literature, particularly the writers and producers, to work with a new vision and dedication. Thus Nepali children literature will be able to meet our present need and enter new dimension.

Thank you.

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¹¹ Telephone talk with Mr. Shanta Das.