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Narrating Childhood in Indian English Children's Literature: A Study of the *Panchatantra* and the *Jataka Tales*

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Abstract

Indian English children's literature holds an important place in the cultural and literary history of India. It reflects evolving ideas about childhood, morality, identity, and social responsibility. Some of the earliest and most influential storytelling traditions that shaped Indian childhood are the *Panchatantra* and the *Jataka Tales*. These texts blend entertainment with moral lessons, imagination, and cultural values through engaging stories that continue to impact generations of readers.

This article looks at the historical development of Indian children's literature and explores how the *Panchatantra* and the *Jataka Tales* helped form the concept of childhood in India. By analyzing selected stories, the study examines how fantasy, moral education, cultural identity, and social learning shape childhood experiences. The article suggests that these classic narratives remain relevant in today's India because they preserve cultural memory while adjusting to changing social and literary environments.

Keywords: Childhood, Indian English children's literature, *Panchatantra*, *Jataka Tales*.

Concept of Childhood

Childhood is one of the most significant yet complex concepts in human society. Traditionally, childhood refers to the period of life between birth and adolescence, characterized by physical growth, cognitive development, emotional maturation, and social learning. However, contemporary scholars argue that childhood cannot be understood solely as a biological stage. Rather, it is a social, cultural, historical, and ideological construct whose meanings vary across different societies and historical periods. The understanding of childhood has changed considerably over time, reflecting broader transformations in family structures, educational systems, religious beliefs, economic conditions, and cultural values.

The word "childhood" generally denotes a phase of dependency and learning during which individuals acquire the knowledge, values, and skills necessary for participation in society. Children

are introduced to language, customs, traditions, social norms, and moral principles through family interactions, education, and cultural institutions. Childhood, therefore, serves as a foundational stage in the formation of personal identity and social consciousness. Because children represent the future of society, ideas about childhood often reveal a culture's hopes, anxieties, and expectations regarding social continuity and change. Modern childhood studies emphasize that childhood is not a universal or fixed category. Allison James and Alan Prout argue that childhood should be understood as a social construction rather than a purely natural phenomenon. According to their view, societies actively create meanings associated with childhood through laws, educational systems, cultural practices, and literary representations.

One of the most influential contributions to the study of childhood was made by the French historian Philippe Ariès in his landmark work *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*. Ariès challenged the assumption that "childhood has always existed in its modern form. He argues that "medieval European society lacked a distinct concept of childhood and that children were often treated as miniature adults. Once they survived infancy, children participated in adult activities, work, and social life with relatively little distinction between childhood and adulthood" (Ariès 126). According to Ariès, "the modern concept of childhood emerged gradually between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries as changing educational practices, family structures, and social attitudes encouraged greater attention to children's needs and development" (Ariès 128). Although some aspects of Ariès's argument have been debated, his work established childhood as an important subject of historical inquiry.

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries witnessed further changes in attitudes toward children. Industrialization, compulsory education, child welfare legislation, and psychological research contributed to the recognition of childhood as a protected stage of life. Psychologists such as Jean Piaget emphasized the importance of cognitive development during childhood, while educational theorists highlighted the role of learning and socialization in shaping children's personalities. These developments reinforced the view that childhood constitutes a distinct and important phase requiring specialized attention and care. Literature has played a crucial role in constructing and representing childhood throughout history. Children's literature does not merely entertain young readers; it also communicates social values, moral lessons, cultural traditions, and ideological assumptions. Through stories, children encounter models of behaviour that shape their understanding of right and wrong, self and society, imagination and reality. Peter Hunt observes that "children's literature functions as a cultural institution through which societies define childhood and transmit their values to future generations" (Hunt 8). Literary texts, therefore, serve as important sources for understanding how childhood is imagined and represented within specific cultural contexts.

Contemporary childhood studies recognize multiple childhoods rather than a single universal experience. Globalization, technological change, urbanization, and shifting family structures have transformed children's lives in significant ways. Modern children encounter diverse cultural influences through education, media, and digital technologies, creating new forms of childhood experience. As a result, contemporary scholars emphasize the need to examine childhood within specific social, historical, and cultural contexts.

Indian Perspectives on Childhood

While Western theorists such as Philippe Ariès, Peter Hunt, Allison James, and Alan Prout provide useful frameworks for understanding childhood as a social construct, Indian conceptions of childhood emerge from distinct cultural, religious, and philosophical traditions. In Indian society, childhood has historically been understood not merely as a biological stage but as a period of moral, spiritual, and intellectual formation. The Guru-Shishya tradition emphasized discipline, character building, and the transmission of ethical values alongside knowledge. Hindu philosophical texts often associate childhood with the gradual development of *dharma*, self-control, and social responsibility,

while Buddhist traditions stress compassion, non-violence, and moral consciousness. These indigenous perspectives reveal that childhood in India has been shaped by cultural and religious values that differ in significant ways from Western models. Therefore, the study of Indian children's literature requires a contextual framework that acknowledges both global theories of childhood and local cultural traditions.

Historical Development of Indian Children's Literature

The history of Indian children's literature is one of the oldest and richest literary traditions in the world. Its origins can be traced to ancient oral storytelling practices that existed long before the development of written literature. Stories formed an important part of everyday life and were transmitted orally through families, village communities, religious institutions, and educational centres. Grandparents, teachers, priests, and storytellers narrated tales that entertained children while simultaneously imparting moral values, practical wisdom, social norms, and cultural traditions.

Vedic and Epic Period (1500 BCE–500 BCE)

The earliest foundations of Indian children's literature may be located in the Vedic age. Although the Vedas were not composed specifically for children, they contained myths, legends, hymns, and symbolic narratives that later entered popular storytelling traditions. Stories concerning gods, sages, demons, and cosmic events stimulated children's imagination and introduced them to religious and cultural values. The two great Indian epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, composed between approximately 500 BCE and 400 CE, further enriched this narrative tradition. These epics presented memorable characters such as Rama, Sita, Hanuman, Arjuna, Bhima, and Krishna, whose actions illustrated virtues including courage, loyalty, duty, sacrifice, and righteousness. For centuries, these stories served as an important source of moral education for children throughout India.

Buddhist and Jain Narrative Traditions (500 BCE–300 CE)

A major development in Indian storytelling occurred with the rise of Buddhism and Jainism. Religious teachers recognized the educational value of narrative and employed stories as a means of communicating philosophical and ethical teachings. The most influential collection from this period was the *Jataka Tales*, which narrate the previous births of the Buddha in both human and animal forms. These stories emphasized compassion, generosity, wisdom, self-sacrifice, and moral responsibility. Similarly, Jain literature produced numerous didactic stories designed to teach principles such as non-violence, truthfulness, self-discipline, and ethical conduct. These narratives contributed significantly to the moral and educational dimensions of Indian children's literature.

Classical Sanskrit Period (300 CE–1200 CE)

The Classical Sanskrit period witnessed the creation of some of India's most influential children's story collections. The most important milestone was the composition of the *Panchatantra*, traditionally attributed to Vishnu Sharma around the third century BCE, though its written form evolved. According to literary tradition, Vishnu Sharma composed the work to educate three young princes who lacked interest in conventional learning. Through a series of interconnected animal fables, the text taught practical wisdom, leadership, diplomacy, friendship, and ethical behaviour. The success of the *Panchatantra* inspired the creation of similar collections, such as the *Hitopadesha*, which adapted many *Panchatantra* stories while emphasizing moral instruction and political wisdom. Other influential narrative collections included the *Kathasaritsagara*, the *Vetala Panchavimshati* (*Baital Pachisi*), and the *Singhasan Battisi*. These works enriched Indian storytelling with elements of adventure, fantasy, mystery, and moral reflection.

Medieval Period (1200–1750 CE)

During the medieval period, storytelling traditions continued to flourish through oral performance and regional literary cultures. Folk tales, legends, ballads, and devotional narratives became important sources of entertainment and education for children. Stories associated with Bhakti saints such as Kabir, Mirabai, Tukaram, and Purandaradasa introduced children to spiritual devotion, ethical living, and social equality. At the same time, Persian and Arabic influences entered Indian storytelling through works such as the *Arabian Nights* and animal fables translated into regional languages. These interactions expanded the range of themes, characters, and narrative techniques available in children's literature.

Colonial Period (1757–1947)

The colonial period marked a significant turning point in the development of Indian children's literature. British educational policies introduced English-language education, printing technology, and new literary genres into India. Missionary presses and educational institutions published books specifically designed for young readers. During the nineteenth century, Indian scholars and intellectuals began translating ancient texts such as the *Panchatantra*, *Jataka Tales*, *Ramayana*, and *Mahabharata* into English. These translations preserved indigenous narrative traditions while making them accessible to modern readers. Children's magazines and school textbooks also became important vehicles for literary dissemination.

Post-Independence Period (1947–1990)

After India's independence in 1947, children's literature experienced remarkable growth. The newly independent nation recognized literature as an important tool for education and nation-building. Government institutions and publishing organizations encouraged the production of books for children in both English and regional languages. The establishment of the Children's Book Trust in 1957 by Kartar Singh Duggal and Shankar Pillai significantly promoted children's publishing. The National Book Trust further supported the creation and distribution of children's books throughout India. During this period, writers such as Ruskin Bond, R. K. Narayan, Manoj Das, and Leela Majumdar enriched children's literature through stories that combined realism, imagination, and cultural experience.

Contemporary Period (1990–Present)

Since the 1990s, Indian children's literature has undergone a rapid transformation. Globalization, technological change, and expanding publishing industries have contributed to the emergence of diverse literary forms and themes. Contemporary authors such as Sudha Murty, Paro Anand, Devdutt Pattanaik, Anushka Ravishankar, and Sampurna Chattarji address issues including identity, gender, multiculturalism, environmental sustainability, disability, and human rights.

Research Gap and Significance of the Study

Although the Panchatantra and the Jataka Tales have been extensively examined from literary, historical, religious, and philosophical perspectives, limited scholarly attention has been paid to how these texts construct childhood within the framework of Indian English children's literature. Existing studies often focus on moral instruction, folklore, or religious teachings, while the representation of childhood as a social and cultural category remains underexplored. This study seeks to address that gap by examining how these classical narratives shape concepts of childhood through moral education, fantasy, social learning, and cultural identity. By bringing together childhood studies and Indian children's literature, the article offers a fresh perspective on the continuing relevance of these texts in contemporary literary and cultural discourse.

Panchatantra and Jataka Tales as Indian English Children's Literature

Although the Panchatantra and the Jataka Tales were originally composed in Sanskrit and Pali respectively, they have become an integral part of Indian English children's literature through translation, adaptation, and educational circulation. Since the nineteenth century, these narratives have been translated into English and widely published for young readers in India and abroad. Their inclusion in school curricula, children's story collections, and popular retellings has enabled them to function as significant texts within the Indian English literary tradition. Therefore, this study approaches the Panchatantra and the Jataka Tales not in their original linguistic forms alone but as texts that continue to shape childhood through their English-language versions and adaptations.

Panchatantra and the Construction of Childhood

The *Panchatantra* occupies a foundational position in Indian children's literature because it presents childhood as a stage of practical learning, intellectual development, and moral formation. Traditionally attributed to Vishnu Sharma, the text was originally composed to educate young princes in the principles of wisdom, leadership, diplomacy, and ethical conduct.

This educational purpose is achieved not through direct instruction but through the creative use of fantasy and imagination. Fantasy occupies a central position in children's literature because it creates a bridge between imagination and reality. Children naturally respond to imaginative worlds that allow them to explore experiences beyond the limitations of everyday life. "Children's literature combines imagination, creativity, fantasy, and entertainment in ways that contribute significantly to a child's intellectual and emotional growth" (Kallimani 110). The *Panchatantra* exemplifies this literary function by transforming complex social and ethical questions into engaging narratives populated by talking animals and symbolic characters. Through these imaginative representations, young readers are able to encounter situations involving power, friendship, loyalty, deception, intelligence, and responsibility in a form that is both accessible and enjoyable.

"The *Panchatantra* and the *Jataka Tales* employ fantasy not merely as a source of entertainment but as a powerful educational strategy. In both collections, animals speak, reason, and behave like human beings. Through these anthropomorphic characters, complex social and moral issues become accessible to young readers. By observing the successes and failures of these characters, children learn to evaluate actions, understand consequences, and develop sound judgment. Fantasy also stimulates creativity and critical thinking. Rather than simply receiving moral instructions, children actively interpret the actions of characters and evaluate the consequences of their decisions. This process encourages independent thought and strengthens moral reasoning" (Stephens 56–62).

Furthermore, fantasy contributes to the construction of childhood by presenting children as active participants in the learning process rather than passive recipients of moral lessons. The imaginative framework of the *Panchatantra* encourages curiosity, reflection, and intellectual engagement, allowing children to make connections between fictional situations and real-life experiences. In this way, the text acknowledges children's capacity for reasoning and decision-making while guiding them toward ethical behaviour. The stories encourage children to think critically about human behaviour and social relationships rather than merely accepting prescribed moral rules. Through the adventures of lions, jackals, monkeys, crows, rabbits, and other animal characters, readers encounter situations involving friendship, betrayal, trust, cooperation, greed, and intelligence. Each story presents a problem or conflict that requires careful judgment and practical wisdom to resolve.

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conflict that requires careful judgment and practical wisdom to resolve. As children follow the actions and decisions of the characters, they learn to evaluate consequences, distinguish between wise and foolish behaviour, and develop their own moral reasoning.

In "The Lion and the Rabbit," a fierce lion terrorizes the animals of a forest and demands that one animal be sent to him daily as food. When it is the rabbit's turn, the small animal devises a clever plan. He tells the lion that another lion challenged his authority and leads him to a well. Seeing his own reflection in the water, the lion jumps into the well and dies. The story teaches that intelligence and strategic thinking can overcome physical strength and oppression. In "The Monkey and the Crocodile," a crocodile befriends a monkey who lives on a fruit tree by the river. Later, the crocodile's wife desires the monkey's heart and persuades her husband to bring the monkey to her. During the journey, the monkey cleverly claims that he left his heart on the tree and escapes when the crocodile returns to the riverbank. The story emphasizes quick thinking, presence of mind, and adaptability in difficult situations.

The narrative technique of the Panchatantra relies heavily on animal symbolism and frame narration. The lion symbolises power and tyranny, whereas the rabbit represents intelligence and strategic thinking. By assigning human qualities to animals, the text creates a symbolic world through which children can understand social relationships and power structures. The stories do not present morality as abstract principles; rather, they dramatise ethical dilemmas through conflict and resolution. This narrative strategy encourages children to participate actively in the interpretative process and develop independent moral judgment.

Similarly, in "The Monkey and the Crocodile," the monkey symbolises adaptability and presence of mind, while the crocodile represents misplaced trust and moral weakness. The narrative demonstrates that intelligence and emotional control are more valuable than physical strength. Through such symbolic characterization, the Panchatantra constructs childhood as a stage of intellectual development in which children learn to analyse situations critically and make wise decisions.

"The Tortoise and the Geese" tells the story of a talkative tortoise who wishes to travel with two geese. The geese agree to carry him while he holds a stick in his mouth, warning him not to speak during the journey. Unable to remain silent when people below mock him, the tortoise opens his mouth and falls to his death. The narrative teaches self-control, patience, and the importance of listening to wise advice. In "The Blue Jackal," a jackal accidentally falls into a vat of blue dye and emerges with a strange appearance. The other animals believe he is a special creature sent to rule the forest. Enjoying his newfound authority, the jackal deceives the animals until he reveals his true nature by howling with other jackals. The story warns against deception, arrogance, and false identity. Similarly, "The Crow and the Serpent" narrates the struggle of a crow whose eggs are repeatedly eaten by a serpent. With the help of a wise friend, the crow steals a queen's necklace and drops it near the serpent's hole. When royal guards arrive to retrieve the necklace, they discover and kill the serpent. The story demonstrates how intelligence, planning, and cooperation can overcome powerful enemies.

Collectively, these stories encourage children to develop critical thinking, self-discipline, social awareness, and problem-solving abilities. Childhood is represented not as a period of passive innocence but as an active process of learning how to navigate the complexities of social life. The educational value of these narratives emerges from their ability to connect imaginative adventures with situations familiar to children. While the stories are set in a fantasy world inhabited by talking animals, the experiences of the characters closely resemble the challenges that children encounter in their everyday lives. Just as the rabbit in "The Lion and the Rabbit" uses intelligence to overcome a stronger adversary, children often learn to rely on creativity and reasoning when faced with difficulties. The monkey's quick thinking in "The Monkey and the Crocodile" reflects the importance of presence of

mind when dealing with unexpected situations, while the fate of the tortoise in "The Tortoise and the Geese" demonstrates the consequences of impatience and the inability to exercise self-control. Similarly, the deceptive behaviour of the jackal in "The Blue Jackal" and the strategic cooperation seen in "The Crow and the Serpent" introduce children to questions of honesty, trust, friendship, and collective action.

Through these characters and situations, children are invited to compare the fictional events with their own experiences of friendship, conflict, decision-making, obedience, and responsibility. The stories do not impose moral lessons directly; instead, they encourage young readers to observe, interpret, and evaluate the actions of the characters and the consequences that follow. In doing so, children become active participants in the learning process, developing their capacity for judgment and ethical reasoning. The *Panchatantra*, therefore, constructs childhood as a stage of intellectual growth in which imagination serves as a powerful medium for understanding human behaviour, social relationships, and moral responsibility. By blending fantasy with practical wisdom, the text enables children to relate literary experiences to real-life situations and prepares them to engage thoughtfully with the world around them.

Jataka Tales and Childhood

The *Jataka Tales* provide a different but equally significant model of childhood, whereas the *Panchatantra* emphasizes practical wisdom, intelligence, and worldly knowledge; the *Jataka Tales* focus primarily on ethical and spiritual development. These stories, which narrate the previous births of the Buddha in both human and animal forms, were originally intended to communicate Buddhist teachings through engaging and accessible narratives. As a result, childhood in the *Jataka Tales* is represented as a period of moral growth during which individuals learn values such as compassion, generosity, honesty, patience, self-sacrifice, and kindness.

The central figure in many *Jataka* stories is the Bodhisattva, who consistently demonstrates exemplary moral behaviour even in difficult circumstances. Whether appearing as a deer, monkey, elephant, rabbit, or human being, the Bodhisattva places the welfare of others above personal interests. Through these characters, young readers are encouraged to develop empathy and a sense of responsibility toward others. Stories such as *The Golden Deer*, *The Monkey King*, and *The Selfless Hare* illustrate how acts of kindness, courage, and selflessness ultimately lead to positive outcomes and moral fulfilment. The *Jataka Tales* present childhood as a stage of character formation and spiritual learning. They suggest that education is not limited to acquiring knowledge or practical skills but also involves the cultivation of moral consciousness and humane values. Through their emphasis on compassion, self-discipline, and ethical responsibility, the *Jataka Tales* offer a powerful vision of childhood that continues to influence Indian children's literature and moral education.

In "The Golden Deer," the Bodhisattva is born as a magnificent golden deer who possesses extraordinary kindness and wisdom. When a pregnant doe is selected for sacrifice by the king's hunters, the golden deer offers his own life in her place. Moved by this act of compassion, the king abandons hunting and grants protection to all animals. The story teaches self-sacrifice, empathy, and concern for the welfare of others. In "The Monkey King," the Bodhisattva is presented as the leader of a large troop of monkeys living near a river. When human soldiers attempt to capture the monkeys, the Monkey King uses his own body as a bridge to help his followers escape to safety. Though he suffers fatal injuries, he saves his community. The narrative emphasizes leadership, courage, and selfless service.

In "The Banyan Deer," two herds of deer are hunted by a king. The Banyan Deer volunteers to sacrifice himself to save a pregnant deer from death. His noble action deeply affects the king, who promises never again to hunt deer. The story encourages compassion, justice, and respect for all living creatures. Another important tale is "The Selfless Hare." In this story, a hare resolves to help anyone in

need. When a hungry traveller appears, the hare offers his own body as food and jumps into a fire. The traveller is revealed to be a divine being who saves the hare and immortalizes his image on the moon.

Unlike the Panchatantra, which privileges practical wisdom and worldly intelligence, the Jataka Tales employ narrative repetition and exemplary characters to cultivate moral and spiritual consciousness. The Bodhisattva functions as an ethical model whose actions invite imitation and reflection. Animal symbolism in these stories creates emotional identification between the reader and the characters, thereby encouraging empathy and compassion. The narrative structure repeatedly demonstrates that selflessness, generosity, and moral responsibility ultimately lead to harmony and social well-being.

The Golden Deer symbolises compassion and sacrifice, while the Monkey King represents ideal leadership and collective responsibility. These symbolic figures encourage children to internalise values such as kindness, cooperation, and empathy. Childhood is therefore represented not merely as a stage of acquiring knowledge but as a process of moral and emotional growth.

The continuing relevance of these stories lies in their ability to connect moral ideals with situations that children can understand and relate to in their everyday lives. Although the narratives are set in imaginative worlds populated by animals and extraordinary characters, the emotions and experiences they portray are familiar to young readers. Children encounter situations that require them to share with others, help friends, show kindness, tell the truth, cooperate in groups, and make choices between self-interest and concern for others. The compassion of the Golden Deer, the leadership of the Monkey King, the justice of the Banyan Deer, and the generosity of the Selfless Hare provide models of behavior that children can admire and emulate. By identifying with these characters, children learn to understand the feelings and needs of others and develop empathy, responsibility, and respect for all forms of life. Rather than presenting morality as a set of rigid rules, the *Jataka Tales* encourage children to reflect on the consequences of actions and the importance of ethical decision-making. In this way, childhood is constructed as a period of moral and emotional development in which young readers actively cultivate virtues that shape their relationships with others and their understanding of the world.

Conclusion

The history of Indian children's literature reflects the dynamic relationship between storytelling, education, and cultural identity. From ancient oral traditions to contemporary English-language publications, narratives have played a crucial role in shaping childhood experiences and transmitting cultural values. The *Panchatantra* and the *Jataka Tales* remain foundational texts because they construct childhood as a period of intellectual, moral, and social development. Through animal fables, fantasy, symbolism, and ethical instruction, these narratives encourage children to cultivate wisdom, compassion, responsibility, and self-awareness.

Although contemporary Indian childhood is shaped by globalization, digital media, and changing social realities, the lessons contained within these classical narratives continue to remain relevant. Their ability to combine imagination with moral education ensures their enduring significance within Indian culture. Consequently, Indian English children's literature serves as an important space in which history, identity, and childhood are continuously negotiated and transformed.

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