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Childhood in Classical and Precolonial Indian Literature: Cultural Constructions, Moral Formation, and Social Order

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Abstract: ***This study is on the representation of childhood in ancient and pre-colonial Indian literature. It questions the universalist notions of childhood as a naturally innocent, independent and universally experienced stage of life. It explores the conception of childhood in indigenous cultural, religious and social contexts drawing on classics like as the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, Puranic narratives, Panchatantra stories, Jataka tales and Bhakti poetry. Childhood, in these literary traditions, is also not depicted as a time of individual independence but as a socially inscribed and culturally regulated stage, constituted by moral teaching, religious ideals, family responsibility, and communal expectations. The child figures such as Rama, Krishna, Prahlada and Dhruva embody the ideals of obedience, commitment, courage and self-discipline. They are examples of ethical conduct and societal duty. The analysis shows how caste, gender and social hierarchy deeply affected childhoods and generated many, unequal childhoods, not one universal childhood. Bhakti literature introduces emotional and spiritual dimensions by describing infancy as a nucleus of heavenly love and devotion. The study highlights non-Western literary traditions and the limitations of hegemonic Western frames of reference in comprehending diverse childhood experiences. It advocates culturally grounded and historically informed methods in Childhood Studies and demonstrates that childhood in classical and precolonial Indian literature is a complex cultural creation shaped by religion, morality, social stratification, and collective identity.***

Keywords: Childhood, Classical Indian Literature, Precolonial India, Dharma, Bhakti, Puranas, Ramayana, Mahabharata, Pedagogy, Cultural Studies

1. Introduction

The study of childhood has developed into a major interdisciplinary topic involving history, sociology, anthropology, psychology, and literary studies. One of the seminal contributions to the topic is Philippe Ariès's argument that childhood is not a universal or physiologically constant period of life, but a historically manufactured category that varies from time to time and culture to culture (Ariès 125). Although Ariès's thesis has been revised and critiqued for its Eurocentric assumptions and methodological limitations, it inaugurated a wider scholarly movement to understand childhood as a social and cultural phenomenon rather than as a natural developmental stage (Cunningham 17; James and Prout 2). Contemporary infancy Studies has developed to incorporate a critique of Western universalist paradigms and to emphasise the need of studying infancy in unique historical, cultural and geographical contexts (Stearns 9).

Classical and precolonial Indian literature provides a rich archive for studying alternate interpretations of childhood within this broader intellectual framework. Indian literary traditions do not view childhood as a time of innocence, psychological interiority, individual growth and autonomy as in modern Western concepts, but conceptualise it through the inter-related frameworks of dharma, kinship, caste, pedagogy and spirituality. These books present childhood as a socially entrenched and ethically regulated period of life shaped by group responsibilities rather than individual self-expression (Chakrabarti 21; Nandy 63). Thus, we cannot simply use modern developmental paradigms in order to understand infancy in classical Indian literature, we must read it within the cultural and cosmological systems that shaped premodern Indian civilisation.

Children in classical Indian literary depiction are commonly integrated into wider moral, social, and cosmic hierarchies. Childhood is seldom depicted as a separate world isolated from adult responsibility. Instead, from a young age, children are enmeshed in networks of family, kinship, caste and religious obligation. The individual identity cannot be detached from the communal identity and children are expected to internalise social and ethical obligations that contribute to the maintenance of societal harmony and cosmic order (Thapar 67; Chakrabarti 21). The literary narratives therefore foreground the cultivation of moral character and social responsibility over the study of inner emotions or developmental individuality.

This perspective is notably apparent in the major epics and Puranic traditions. In these writings, child figures act less as psychologically complicated persons and more as symbolic representations of ethical principles and social values. For example, the Ramayana describes the childhood of Rama as being characterised by discipline, obedience, restraint and moral precocity. His boyhood is used mostly to affirm his destiny as a perfect ruler and upholder of dharma rather than to examine the emotional experiences of growing up (Valmiki 1.18; Goldman 112). The Mahabharata, for example, depicts infancy caught up in dynastic politics, social turmoil, and moral duty. The youthful Pandavas and Kauravas are introduced to the structures of rivalry, authority, and responsibility from a young age, implying that ethical conflict and societal duty begin long before adulthood (Hiltebeitel 54).

The didactic traditions of the Panchatantra and the Hitopadeśa further elucidate the pedagogical features of childhood in pre-colonial India. These collections of fables and moral tales see the child mainly as a subject needing training, discipline and supervision. Their storylines are deliberately constructed to instil practical wisdom, political prudence, and moral conduct in young learners. These writings emphasise training for future social and political obligations and reinforce hierarchical relationships between teacher and student, ruler and subject, elder and younger generations, rather than glorifying youthful innocence (Edgerton xii; Olivelle 89). Childhood is thus a developmental period dedicated to moral teaching and socialisation.

The Bhakti movement presents another, but no less important, picture of childhood. The theme of divine infancy, particularly that of Krishna, is prevalent in the corpus of bhakti literature, where the adventures of his boyhood are vividly portrayed in the devotional stories of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa. These stories highlight fun, affection and emotional connection, providing a more affective and relational perspective of childhood. But such portrayals do not praise autonomy in the modern sense. Instead, childhood is a theological image that enables devotional submission and spiritual dependence. The young Krishna epitomises divine play (līlā), drawing devotees into close emotional interactions, yet reaffirming devotional hierarchies and religious authority (Hawley 45; Hardy 302). Here, childhood is not a symbol of individual freedom, but a vehicle for expressing spiritual truths.

These literary traditions also indicate that infancy in pre-colonial India was highly stratified. Caste position, gender norms, family lineage and access to education influenced childhood experiences. Literature also reflects and reproduces greater social structures, and the tasks, responsibilities, and possibilities of children are vary depending on their social place. Such representations show that childhood was not unitary, nor lived universally. The social order was, rather, constituted by several childhoods, each organised by specific kinds of privilege, exclusion and authority (Balagopalan 14; Chakrabarti 21).

When read together, classical and precolonial Indian literary texts reveal that childhood was conceived as a culturally ingrained and ethically charged stage of existence. Childhood was a site for the transmission of religious ideals, social standards, pedagogical discipline, and group identity rather than a domain of innocence or psychological growth. Children were vehicles of lineage continuity, preservers of dharma, subjects of moral education, and members of religious societies. They indicate the ways in which childhood was closely linked to broader systems of social reproduction—caste hierarchy, gender regulation, educational authority, cosmological order (Doniger 2009; Kakar 1978; Olivelle 89).

The investigation of these literary traditions reveals the limitations of universalist and Eurocentric theories of childhood. Classical Indian writings, emphasising indigenous notions of age, agency, morality and social responsibility, provide alternative understandings of childhood, outside the categories of innocence, autonomy and developmental psychology. These views strengthen Childhood Studies by highlighting the multiplicity of childhood experiences across cultures and historical times. The breadth of the field expands by focusing on the peculiarity of Indian literary archives, but also promotes the development of culturally grounded techniques that can engage with non-Western traditions on their own terms (Balagopalan 14; Chakrabarty 2000). Ultimately, the study of childhood in classical and pre-colonial Indian literature highlights the need to recognise childhood as a historically dependent and culturally formed category, whose meanings are generated in relation to certain social, ethical, and cosmological contexts.

Theoretical Perspectives on Premodern Childhood

The formation of Childhood Studies as a distinct multidisciplinary study has fundamentally altered scholarly understandings of children and childhood. Today, experts are increasingly seeing childhood not as a universal, biologically determined stage of human development, but as a historically and culturally constructed category with meanings that differ among civilisations and historical periods. A major contributor to this shift was the publication of Philippe Ariès' *Centuries of Infancy* (1962), which argued that there was no modern idea of infancy as a separate and protected stage of existence in mediaeval Europe. As family structures, educational institutions, and social attitudes evolved, the concept of childhood as a distinct sphere of innocence, dependency, and protection gradually emerged, with children often being incorporated into adult social worlds at an early age (Ariès 128). Ariès's theory has been critiqued for its Eurocentric bias, selective use of visual data and broad historical generalisations. However, his insistence on the historical contingency of infancy is one of the key themes of infancy Studies.

The relevance of Ariès's work lies not so much in providing a universal model of infancy but in showing that childhood is produced by specific cultural and historical situations. His idea encourages scientists to examine how different countries conceptualise children in the context of their specific social structures, ethical systems and cultural values. Ariès's framework, when applied with care to the Indian context, raises important questions about whether childhood in classical and pre-colonial Indian society operated as a separate social category, or as part of larger systems of family, religion, education, and social organization. Rather than assuming that modern Western ideas of infancy are universal, scholars need to go to Indian literary, theological and philosophical traditions for an understanding of how children, society and moral order were conceptualised.

Later scholars of Childhood Studies have built on Ariès's discoveries, highlighting the variability of childhood experiences across cultures. James and Prout (7) contend that childhood must be seen as a social institution, always being constructed and reconstructed through cultural practices, social relations and institutional arrangements. Likewise, Hugh Cunningham observes that children in premodern societies were seen as less unique individuals emotionally, and more as members of social collectives

whose identities were shaped by family, labour, religion and communal obligations (Cunningham 15). Such views trouble developmental models that place childhood as a universal experience, and open the way for scholars to investigate the particular historical and cultural contexts that inform children's lives.

In pre-modern societies, childhood was generally defined by early engagement in social, economic and religious life. Soon children were introduced to systems of labour, ritual practice, and moral education that prepared them for adult responsibilities. In India these processes were deeply affected by the interwoven systems of varna and ashrama. The varna system divided society into social groups based on inherited status and the ashrama system divided the human life cycle into different stages; each with its own tasks and obligations. Together these systems set expectations for education, discipline, religious practice and social behaviour from birth onwards (Thapar 67). Childhood was therefore not regarded as a period of liberty or self-expression but as a phase of development during which people discovered their social roles and ethical duties.

This idea of childhood as a socially embedded and culturally mediated occurrence is mirrored in classical Indian literary traditions. Rarely are children portrayed as autonomous entities beyond family or community. Rather they are represented as part of bigger institutions of kinship, lineage, caste and religious responsibility. They are important not only in terms of vulnerability or their developmental potential, but also in terms of their role in ensuring continuity between generations. Children are carriers of family bloodlines; custodians of societal order; and future guardians of dharma (moral and cosmic order). Literary narratives highlight obedience, discipline, dedication and moral obligation, suggesting that childhood was valued primarily for its contribution to ongoing social and ethical norms (Chakrabarti 21; Thapar 67).

This is a stark contrast to the current romanticised constructions of childhood which associate children with innocence, spontaneity and emotional sincerity. In romantic and developmental conceptions, childhood is often shown as a sanctuary outside the burdens of adulthood. By contrast, premodern Indian literary traditions tend to dissolve such boundaries and integrate children into systems of responsibility and ethical formation at a very early age. Childhood is not free from societal commitments but is actively influenced by it. Literary representations of children, therefore, are frequently employed for educational and ideological purposes, reflecting ideal types of behaviour and reinforcing cultural norms.

The didactic traditions of classical India perhaps best embody the educational point of view. For example, the Panchatantra and the Hitopadeśa view infancy largely as a period for education and character development. These collections of moral tales were designed to teach young students practical wisdom, political prudence and moral conduct. The child, according to Edgerton in his introduction to the Panchatantra, is a sort of learner whose ignorance is to be cured by the application of systematic teaching and moral direction (Edgerton xii). The meaning of these stories is not so much the purity of youth, but the significance of intellectual development, self-discipline and preparedness for participation in social and political life.

Therefore, a theoretical approach to premodern infancy necessitates approaches that go beyond universal developmental principles and take into consideration cultural variety. Classical Indian literary traditions abound with a morally charged and socially ingrained idea of childhood shaped by religious philosophy, pedagogical discipline and community responsibility. By looking at these representations, scholars can get valuable knowledge about alternate ideas of infancy that run counter to contemporary notions of autonomy, innocence and individual growth. These notions not only add to our understanding of Indian literary traditions but also contribute to larger endeavours within Childhood Studies to address the variety of childhood experiences across countries and historical periods.

Childhood in the Indian Epics: Ramayana and Mahabharata

The Sanskrit epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, have a significant place in the cultural and literary history of India and have profoundly influenced social understandings of morality, kinship, kingship, and responsibility. They also give some of the earliest and most influential portrayals of childhood in Indian literary traditions. Unlike the way many modern stories treat childhood as a distinct developmental phase characterised by psychological development, emotional exploration, and self-awareness, the Indian epics generally portray childhood as a formative period in which moral character, social identity, and future destiny are established. Childhood episodes are short and selected, not meant to investigate the inner world of the child, but to predict the ethical, political, and spiritual positions that children would later play in society (Thapar 71; Hiltebeitel 54).

In both epics, children are integrated within larger frameworks of family, lineage, caste and monarch. The value of these objects lies not in the objects themselves, but in the way in which they relate to greater social and cosmological structures. Thus, childhood is described as a time of ethical formation where the principles of dharma (moral obligation), obedience, loyalty and self-discipline are nurtured. The infant is not conceived as an autonomous individual but as a future bearer of social responsibility and cultural continuity.

The Ramayana is one of the most idealised representations of infancy in Indian literature. Rama's childhood is presented as a model of characteristics that characterise his subsequent role as the epitome of righteous rule. Rama is obedient to elders, dutiful, emotionally controlled, and steadfast in adherence to moral values from his early years. His behaviour reveals an inherent observance of dharma, implying that his ethical supremacy is obvious even in his childhood (Valmiki 1.18). Childhood in the Ramayana, then, works less as a time of development and more as evidence of innate goodness and destiny.

The narrative also shows Lakshmana, Bharata and Shatrughna as ideal children whose personalities are formed

by loyalty, affection and devotion to family obligations. The unwavering loyalty of Lakshmana towards Rama, the denial of the throne by Bharata, demonstrate how childhood is associated with the development of moral discipline and family responsibility. These characters are not rebellious, experimental, or psychologically conflicted. Rather, their childhoods reaffirm the moral principles that support the social and political order envisioned by the epic (Goldman 112). The Ramayana thus offers infancy as an introductory phase for the achievement of defined social and moral roles.

By comparison, the Mahabharata portrays a more complicated and conflict-ridden view of childhood. The epic, while highlighting lineage, obligation and moral formation, places children in a milieu of rivalry, political intrigue and dynastic strife. The childhood experiences of the Pandavas and Kauravas show that conflict and competitiveness are part of social life from childhood. Childhood is not seen as a safe space without adult problems, but rather as a period already impacted by power relations, ambition and ethical dilemmas.

One of the most obvious instances is Duryodhana's attempt to poison Bhima during his boyhood. This episode proves that antagonism, jealousy and political competitiveness begin much before adulthood and greatly affect the life of young characters (Ganguli 1, 128). This incident demonstrates the extent to which infancy is embedded in larger fights over succession, power, and legitimacy. The Mahabharata does not picture children as innocent but as active players in the moral and political struggles that characterise the epic world.

The schooling of the princes under Drona further shows the epic's view of childhood. Their training in battle, in statecraft, discipline and duty, occupies a prominent place in their education. (Hiltebeitel 59). The child is shown as preparing for leadership and social responsibility, with the acquisition of knowledge and skills strongly linked to political power and ethical conduct. The youthful heroes are meant to develop societal obligations and qualities required for their future roles as kings and fighters. As a result, childhood is an extension of the larger social order, rather than a separate area of personal development.

The two epics, however different in other respects, share key beliefs about childhood. Childhood has a narrative and ideological function in any work to establish character, destiny, and ethical orientation. Children are prized essentially for their future significance as monarchs, soldiers, worshippers, or stewards of societal order. Their childhood acts foreshadow their adult selves and validate cultural values like obligation, loyalty, self-control, and moral responsibility. Psychological interiority and individual self-expression are subordinate to issues of lineage, social role, and ethical behaviour.

These images question modern ideas of childhood that emphasise innocence, emotional sensitivity, and developmental agency. Rather, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata portray childhood as a culturally rooted stage, intricately tied to moral teaching, socialisation and the replication of social order. The child is a symbolical figure through which larger themes like monarchy, family, authority and dharma are expressed. The epics, therefore, are a useful source of information on the precolonial understanding of childhood in India and illustrate how the literary images of children reflect the ethical and social priorities of the historical context (Thapar 67; Nandy 63).

Through their depictions of Rama, Lakshmana, Bharata, the Pandavas and the Kauravas, these texts show that childhood in classical Indian literature was not seen of as a domain of purity removed from societal reality. It was instead seen as integral to the development of moral character and social identity, firmly woven into the frameworks of kinship, political authority, and cosmological order.

Divine Childhood and the Puranic Tradition

The Classical Indian literature, especially in the Puranic and Bhakti traditions, has a marked tendency to foreground celestial child figures. In contrast to the epic narratives of infancy in the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, where the child characters are predominantly future emperors, soldiers, or stewards of dharma, the puranic accounts frequently elevate childhood to a sacred and theological category. Among these portrayals, Krishna's childhood, especially as described in the Bhagavata Purana, has a major place in the Indian religious and literary imagination. These myths give a particular conception of infancy that elevates play (līlā), devotion (bhakti), emotional intimacy, and divine presence, thus turning childhood from a social phase to a potent emblem of spirituality.

The Bhagavata Purana describes the boyhood of Krishna in a series of playful and frequently naughty adventures. As a child, Krishna steals butter from the homes of the villagers, breaks pots, teases the cowherd ladies and again and again violates the authority of the grownups. These activities seem to be, on a superficial level, breaking the social standards and expectations of proper behaviour. However, within the devotional paradigm of the book, these actions are not conceived as moral infractions to be punished. Rather they are read as divine play, showing Krishna's transcendence of common human categories, and drawing followers into personal interactions with the divine (Bhagavata Purana 10.8–10.11). Hence childhood is a place where heavenly force is expressed in play, not in authority or punishment.

John Stratton Hawley contends that the tales of Krishna's boyhood hold a unique position in devotional literature as they blur the customary boundaries between the human and the divine (Hawley 45). Krishna appears as the average child and as the highest deity through his playful gestures. Such dual identity provides a religious connection for devotees that is not present in formal worship. The divine child is therefore a being to be loved, cared for and emotionally attached to, without losing his cosmic significance. Childhood then becomes a theological form of interaction where believers relate to the sacred in ways that are accessible and emotionally resonant.

The idea of līlā hinges on understanding these representations. In Hindu religious traditions, the word līlā is used to denote to the spontaneous and joyful play through which the divine appears in the world. This is exemplified

by Krishna's childhood activities which describe the divine action as play and not instrumental. His butter thefts, practical jokes, and engagement with the inhabitants of Gokula are not simply comedic interludes but represent the divine's independence from worldly limitations and its ability to turn mundane moments into sacred exchanges (Hardy 302). Līlā connects childhood with creativity, wonder and transcendence and presents a vision of divine-human relationship founded on loving rather than fear.

While epic heroes like Rama have disciplined and ethically restricted childhoods, Krishna's childhood indulges in spontaneity, pleasure, and emotional excess. The child Krishna is curious, lively, naughty and unpredictable. These attributes set him apart from the idealised models of obedience and self-control of many epic child figures. But this apparent freedom should not be taken as an affirmation of social autonomy or individual self-expression in the modern sense. Ultimately, Krishna's light-hearted attitude promotes devotional systems and religious authority. His activities bring believers into relationships of reliance, love and submission, emphasising the asymmetrical link between the human and the divine (Hawley 63).

The devotional significance of the divine childhood is more obvious in the emotional responses of Krishna's devotees, especially his foster-mother Yashoda and the cowherd community of Vrindavan. Their love for Krishna is exhibited in parental love, care, protection and attachment. But again and again these deep interactions are interrupted by revelations of Krishna's divinity. Episodes like Yashoda's vision of the universe in Krishna's lips exemplify the co-presence of human intimacy and divine transcendence (Bhagavata Purana 10.8). Moments like these serve as a reminder to followers that the infant who appears so defenceless is also the supreme cosmic being. Thus, childhood is a paradoxical category through which divine force is made emotionally accessible, while remaining ultimately beyond human comprehension.

The Bhakti tradition intensifies the symbolism of infancy by placing the devotee in a childish relationship to the divine. Devotional surrender frequently demands childlike qualities of trust, dependence, humility, and emotional vulnerability. In this sense, childhood is a metaphor for spiritual receptivity, not bodily age. The devotee's relationship to God resembles a child's dependence on a loving parent, and supports models of religious leadership that are hierarchical but loving (Hardy 315). Childhood thus gains a wider theological importance, transcending images of Krishna himself.

At the same time, these stories illuminate the delicate relationship between freedom and power in devotional traditions. Krishna's childhood appears to champion spontaneity and subversion of social conventions, yet it ultimately exists within a paradigm that upholds communal religious values and devotional hierarchies. The holy child's playful offences are relevant precisely because they are the actions of a being whose authority is above human institutions. Thus, childhood is not represented as a sphere of autonomy but as a vehicle for the transmission of spiritual truths and of the formation of religious identities.

The depiction of Krishna's childhood in the Bhagavata Purana thus presents a distinctive counterpoint to epic and modern ideas of childhood. Instead of moral discipline, psychological development, or individual autonomy, these stories focus on divine play, emotional intimacy, and devotional dependency. Childhood is a theological and cultural construct mediating interactions between the human and the divine, transforming everyday instances of affection, care, and play into expressions of spiritual meaning. These depictions disclose the Puranic tradition as a highly symbolic space where religion, emotion and cultural imagination converge in childhood.

Didactic Narratives and Pedagogical Childhood

Didactic literature plays a central position in ancient Indian literary traditions and offers useful insights into precolonial ideas of childhood, education and socialisation. Among the most influential works in this tradition are the Panchatantra and the Hitopadeśa, collections of interlinked animal fables and moral tales that have affected educational methods across South Asia for centuries. These didactic works are clearly concerned with instruction, unlike epic and Puranic narratives that are mostly concerned with questions of monarchy, devotion and cosmic order. Their main function is educational: to teach practical knowledge, ethics and politics to the young students. They therefore provide a unique view on childhood as a time of intellectual growth and moral guidance, rather than a time of innocence, emotional growth, or personal freedom.

The Panchatantra is historically assigned to a certain Vishnu Sharma and is presented as an educational work intended to teach young kings the art of governing, diplomacy and social conduct. The frame story is that a monarch is sending his sons to the knowledgeable instructor Vishnu Sharma. But the sons are not prepared to study, so Vishnu Sharma tells them stories as a substitute for teaching them. The deployment of narrative as a pedagogical instrument indicates an educational philosophy that appreciates practical wisdom and experiential learning. While animals are the major characters, the intended audience of these stories is the young learner, particularly those who are prepared for positions of authority and responsibility (Edgerton xii).

These texts view childhood not as a moment of innocence or vulnerability, but as a time of ignorance and incompleteness. The kid is viewed as a being who has to be guided, corrected and disciplined in order to gain the knowledge necessary for successful involvement in society. As Franklin Edgerton points out, the Panchatantra was not meant for amusement of children in the modern sense, but for their instruction in practical matters and ethical judgement (xii). Childhood is thus shown as a stage of formation in which ignorance is to be converted into wisdom through methodical instruction and experience.

The pedagogical focus of the Panchatantra and the Hitopadeśa mirrors broader educational objectives in precolonial Indian society. Knowledge is not an aim in itself but as a way of educating people for social, political and moral duties. Through memorable storytelling, students are taught lessons of friendship, loyalty, deception, leadership,

prudence and justice, which prompts them to ponder on the implications of human acts. These tales aim to familiarise the youngsters with the intricacies of social life and provide them with ways to deal with relationships, exercise judgement, and maintain social order (Olivelle 89).

These didactic traditions are characterised by their stress on hierarchy and authority. The pedagogical relation between teacher and pupil is a paradigm for social ties in general, such as that of ruler and subject, elder and younger, and parent and child. Knowledge is handed down from experienced authorities to novice learners, reinforcing institutions of respect, obedience and discipline. Thus, childhood is placed inside a hierarchy where the process of learning is inseparable from submission to legitimate authority. The child has to learn not just information but also habits of self-control, discipline and ethical conduct required to perform specified societal responsibilities (Sharma 114).

In addition, these books understand education as a process of moral and political construction. The stories often deal with issues of governance, statecraft and public behaviour, implying that training in childhood is not only for personal virtue but also for civic and political responsibilities. Young readers are urged to cultivate virtues such as prudence, strategic thinking, loyalty, and foresight—qualities seen as vital for effective leadership and social stability. In this sense, infancy is directly related to the reproduction of social and political order. Education is the way in which cultural values, ethical norms and systems of authority are passed from one generation to another (Olivelle 93).

The didactic literature of precolonial India, however, stresses compliance to societal standards and the learning of practical wisdom over the emphasis on creativity, self-expression, and individual growth common to contemporary educational philosophies. The youngster is not encouraged to criticise established social systems, but to comprehend and navigate them efficiently. Learning is ethical, political and instrumental. The final object is the shaping of a competent and responsible member of the community capable of contributing to the maintenance of social peace and political stability.

At the same time, these stories reflect a deep understanding of human behaviour and social interaction. Using animal characters and symbolic scenarios, they expose learners to concepts like ambition, greed, friendship, betrayal, trust and justice. The tales recognise the intricacies and ambiguities of social life, showing that wisdom is not simply learned by obedience but through observation, contemplation, and experience. Childhood is thus no longer a phase of passive dependence but one of active intellectual participation.

The Panchatantra and the Hitopadeśa thus offer vital evidence for an understanding of precolonial constructs of childhood. They describe children as learners, whose growth is determined by pedagogical discipline, ethical instruction and practical education. There thus develops childhood as a culturally significant stage of learning and preparation for adult responsibilities. Childhood is not seen as a shielded emotional domain, but rather as a formative phase during which individuals are prepared for social, political, and moral engagement.

These images question our ideas that childhood is about innocence, play and emotional growth. Rather, they reflect a view of childhood that is firmly ingrained in systems of education, authority and social reproduction. The importance that pre-colonial Indian civilisation had to children as an important stage in the growth of moral character and social duty is exemplified in the didactic literature with its focus on education, discipline and practical wisdom. Such writings thus provide vital insights into alternate historical understandings of childhood, and stress the significance of culturally grounded approaches in Childhood Studies.

Bhakti Literature and the Emotional Child

The Bhakti movement, from the sixth to the sixteenth centuries, brought a unique and important way of depicting children in Indian literary traditions. Unlike the didactic narratives and epics that generally emphasise educational formation, societal obligation and moral discipline, the bhakti literature emphasises emotive relations, devotion and emotional closeness. Bhakti poetry individualises devotion to a chosen deity, turning religious experience into a personal and intensely emotional activity. In this spiritual context, depictions of childhood, especially in the case of the child Krishna, took on new meaning. As such, these literary constructions offer a potent theological and emotional category for articulating interactions between the human and the divine, rather than simply a biological or social stage.

Some of the most prominent images of holy childhood are to be found in the devotional poetry of Surdas, Mirabai, and other Krishna Bhakti writers. Their works often portray Krishna as a cheerful, mischievous and endearing youngster whose interactions with his mother Yashoda, the cowherd community and his devotees provoke strong feelings of attachment. Krishna's childhood is marked by spontaneity, sensitivity and intensity of feeling, in contrast to the heroic and controlled upbringing of epic figures like Rama. The stories beckon the reader and listener to encounter the divine through ordinary human feelings such as parental tenderness, concern, wonder, and love (Hawley 45).

The emotional appeal of the young Krishna is that it makes the supernatural human. The writers of the Bhakti movement would picture Krishna in his quotidian childhood pastimes—stealing butter, playing with his pals, taunting his mother, rambling about the pastoral meadows of Vrindavan. Such moments put the divine into close touch with normal human experience. These images make the transcendent deity accessible and emotionally relatable, allowing believers to create intimate ties with the sacred (Hardy 302). Childhood then is a literary and theological device to make the divine presence immediate and emotionally relevant.

A major element of the Bhakti depictions is the emergence of vatsalya bhava, the devotional mood of parental love. In this method of devotion, the devotee sees the self as a parent who takes care of the holy child. The relationship between Yashoda and Krishna is an example of devotional practice, of love, of protection, of emotional surrender. Within this framework infancy is associated with reliance and

connection rather than authority and discipline. Krishna the child is a love object, whose apparent helplessness evokes care and emotional commitment from followers (Hawley 63).

Some of the most graphic examples of this emotive method of expression are to be found in the poetry of Surdas. His poems are very concerned with the exploits of Krishna as a kid, scenes of maternal love, humorous misadventures, and social happiness. The emphasis is on the richness of his childhood experiences, not on the eventual function of Krishna as a celestial king or cosmic protector. By portraying the mundane details of everyday interactions, Surdas sacralises acts of caregiving and elevates parental love to the level of religious devotion (Bryant 412).

Similarly, Mirabai's devotional songs often address Krishna in ways emphasising the intimacy and emotional relationship. Her poetry, albeit focused on the devotee-lover relationship, is within the larger Bhakti tradition of highlighting emotional intimacy with the holy. The use of childhood imagery adds to this devotional structure by showing the divine as approachable, loving and emotionally responsive. Such depictions play into the Bhakti movement's emphasis on personal religious experience above ceremonial rigidity and institutional authority (Vaudeville 118).

Bhakti portrayals do not give infancy an independent or autonomous subjectivity, given their concern with attachment and closeness. The child is largely produced through the emotional and devotional gaze of the adult devotee. The boyhood of Krishna is not an isolated event, but a medium of expression of theological truths and devotional sentiments. His acts, feelings and relationships are understood in terms of spiritual meaning rather than psychological complexity. Hence, the kid is less an independent subject than a symbolic figure through which divine-human relationships are mediated (Rose 12).

Thus, scholars have remarked that Bhakti portrayals of childhood both humanise the divine and sacralise familial bonds. In doing so, these stories make mundane practices of parenting, caregiving, and love acts of spiritual significance in that they show God as a child (Hawley 63). The ties between families are become sacred and childhood becomes of theological worth. These images are, nevertheless, still incorporated in devotional hierarchies at the same time. This emotional attachment of the believer eventually strengthens spiritual dependency and submission to divine power. Childhood is not a sign of independence but a metaphor of trust, dependency and devotional surrender (Hardy 315).

This double role sets Bhakti literature apart from the epic and the didactic traditions. Epic narrative is characterised by duty and moral discipline, didactic texts by education and socialisation, and Bhakti poetry by emotional experience and relationship intimacy. However, all three religions maintain that childhood is a category of cultural significance that is affected by greater religious and social norms. In the bhakti literature, childhood is a special space when divine love, emotional attachment and spiritual devotion meet.

The image of the emotional child in the Bhakti literature broadens our understanding of childhood in pre-colonial India. It demonstrates how infancy can serve simultaneously as a theological metaphor, a devotional practice, and a cultural ideal. Instead of presenting infancy as a stage of individual development or psychological autonomy, Bhakti scriptures articulate childhood as a relational category where emotional relationships and spiritual truths are articulated. These literary structures reveal the centrality of feeling, dedication, and intimacy in premodern Indian conceptions of childhood, and offer a vital counterbalance to both modern developmental models and the ethical frameworks of epic literature.

Gender, Caste, and the Limits of Childhood

Classical and pre-colonial Indian literature is replete with representations of children, yet these representations suggest that childhood was not universal and not equally available to all members of the society. Social hierarchies of gender, caste, class and social rank deeply affected childhood experiences. Thus, literary conceptions of infancy typically reflect the larger power structures and inequalities that structured premodern Indian society. Childhood is revealed as a divided and stratified category rather than a uniform phase of life, in which access to education, social recognition, moral agency and cultural prominence varied greatly depending on one's location in the social order.

Unequal representation of boys and girls is one of the most noticeable elements of classical Indian literature. The male kid is at the centre of many literary and theological narratives, particularly the epic, the Puranic and the didactic. The childhoods of figures such as Rama, Krishna, Prahlada, Dhruva, and the Pandavas receive extensive narrative emphasis because they are strongly tied to concerns of genealogy, monarchy, religious authority, and social continuity. Their early lives are presented as formative periods in the making of future kings, warriors, worshippers, and stewards of dharma (Hiltebeitel 54; Goldman 112).

In comparison, there are comparably few images of female childhood. Girls are seldom the principal characters in literary texts. And when they are, their youth is often truncated or overshadowed by their future responsibilities as wives, mothers, or daughters. The relative scarcity of nuanced depictions of girlhood indicates that female childhood was not frequently perceived as a unique, self-contained stage that warranted extended literary consideration. Rather, girls were often socialised early on to domestic, familial and marital responsibilities that limited the cultural space for the development of an independent childhood identity (Thapar 72).

The pattern mirrors greater gendered norms in precolonial society. Educational possibilities, ritual participation, inheritance rights, and public authority were generally organised in patriarchal ways that favoured male experience and desires. Literary narratives thus tend to identify boys with scholarship, heroism, spiritual accomplishment, and public duty, whereas ladies are depicted mostly in relation to domesticity, family honour, and marital duty (Chakravarti 45). Thus, the restricted visibility of girlhood in classical literature reflects the gendered structure of infancy itself,

revealing how cultural acknowledgement was unevenly distributed across the social spectrum.

Scholars have suggested that these silences are as significant as clear representations. The lack of specific accounts of girls' experiences implies that childhood was not a category of universal recognition, but a category controlled by social expectations and institutional frameworks. Female childhood is generally seen as a passage to maturity, rather than a meaningful phase with its own cultural importance (Thapar 72; Chakravarti 48). This comment points to the value of looking at what literary writings represent, but also at what they do not.

Caste is yet another complication in the literary production of childhood. The varna system and other social organization in classical Indian texts often reflect the hierarchical arrangement of society. Prominent narrative places are given to elite children, notably those from royal families, Brahmin homes, and privileged lineages, because they are seen as the future guardians of religious knowledge, political authority, and social order. Their education, moral growth and social obligations will continue to attract literary interest because of the cultural significance of their lives (Olivelle 93).

By contrast, many other literary traditions continue essentially to render invisible lower-caste, submissive and marginalised children. When they do appear, they are frequently depicted as attendants, servants, messengers, labourers or marginal characters whose main role is to support the activities of elite protagonists. Rarely do we delve deeply into their experiences, feelings and hopes. Such representations expose the uneven distribution of narrative visibility and cultural worth in precolonial literary discourse (Chakravarti 61).

The marginalisation of lower-status children is a reflection of wider patterns of social exclusion working across historical Indian society. Caste affiliation often determined access to education, religious instruction, literacy and social mobility and so limited prospects available to many children. Literary texts tend to naturalise these inequities by foregrounding elite childhoods, while leaving subordinate groups mostly invisible. Therefore, childhood is a category that is formed by power relations rather than by biological age (Dirks 87; Chakravarti 58).

These patterns show that, from the point of view of Childhood Studies, childhood is a social differentiated experience. As scholars such as Allison James and Alan Prout have argued, childhood is not a singular or universal category but one built through intersecting mechanisms of power, identity, and social organization (James and Prout 8). The experiences of children differ according to gender, class, ethnicity, religion and social standing. Classical Indian literature offers a good reason to believe this contention, as it illustrates how infancy was differently structured for boys and girls, elites and subordinates, privileged and marginalised people.

The uneven visibility of children in literary texts also reflects the workings of cultural authority. The lives depicted are generally those that are seen to have socially meaningful futures, while others are left on the fringes of narrative focus. Thus, Childhood becomes a location for the reproduction and legitimation of greater social structures. Literary productions help to the creation of cultural norms by deciding which childhoods are remembered, praised and idealised and which are neglected and marginalised (Nandy 63).

Such discoveries undermine modern universalist conceptions of childhood as a shared human experience with common developmental needs and rights. In contrast, classical and precolonial Indian scriptures document the existence of several childhoods, ranked according to systems of gender, caste, and social power. Childhood was not lived in the same way, and it was not reflected in the same way. Rather, it was a socially graded category whose meanings were dependent on one's place within the larger social order.

Thus, an analysis of gender and caste in portrayals of childhood in literature gives us important clues about the functioning of power within cultural narratives. This shows that childhood is not only a biological stage of life but a socially constructed, historically situated category, influenced by institutional structures, cultural values and systems of exclusion. These inequalities are highlighted in classical Indian literature, which provides an important insight into the complex relationship between childhood, identity and social hierarchy, and contributes to wider attempts within Childhood Studies to understand the diversity and plurality of childhood experience across time and place.

2. Conclusion

The present study shows that childhood in classical and precolonial Indian literature, cannot be properly understood within modern universalist frameworks, which identify childhood mainly with innocence, autonomy, emotional vulnerability and psychological growth. Such assumptions have had a major impact on contemporary Childhood Studies; yet the literary traditions of precolonial India present alternate notions of childhood based on different social, ethical, religious and cultural settings. This study has demonstrated that childhood was not conceived of as a protected sphere separate from society, but as a culturally embedded and socially governed stage that was closely tied to larger frameworks of authority, morality, and collective identity, as illustrated by a broad variety of textual traditions including the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, Puranic narratives, didactic literature such as the Panchatantra and Hitopadeśa, and Bhakti poetry.

In all these genres of literature children are shown as important players in the conservation and transmission of social and cultural values. Epic narratives present children as future caretakers of dharma, lineage and political power, commending moral discipline, obedience and social responsibility from an early age (Hiltebeitel 54; Goldman 112). The Puranic and Bhakti traditions provide the childhood with affective and theological dimensions through the image of divine child figures, for instance, Krishna, whose playful and at the same time sacred childhood is a

channel for expressing devotion, emotional intimacy, and spiritual dependence (Hawley 45; Hardy 302). Conversely, didactic writings conceptualised childhood as a phase of pedagogical formation in which knowledge, prudence and ethical behaviour were methodically nurtured through teaching and experience (Edgerton xii; Olivelle 89). Together these literary traditions highlight infancy as a period of moral, religious and social learning rather than a period of pure freedom or individual self-expression.

The study has also brought up the need of looking at infancy in the overlapping frames of gender, caste and social hierarchy. Literary representations show that childhood was not a homogeneous nor universally experienced phenomenon. Access to education, visibility, agency and social recognition differed greatly depending on one's standing within caste and gender frameworks. Female childhoods were frequently truncated by early inclusion into domestic and marital duties, while lower-caste and slave children were predominantly marginalised in hegemonic literary narratives (Thapar 72; Chakravarti 45). Such representations demonstrate that childhood itself was constructed through broader systems of inclusion and exclusion, and that social power was deployed to choose which childhoods were valued, represented and remembered.

These findings relate to wider debates within Childhood Studies in challenging the universalising of Western developmental paradigms. In classical and precolonial Indian literature, childhood is shown as a historically contingent and culturally distinctive category, where its meanings are derived from certain religious ideologies, pedagogical methods, social structures, and cosmological beliefs. Instead of presenting childhood as a natural or universally experienced stage of life, these texts invite scholars to think about the multiplicity of childhoods and how age, agency, responsibility, and identity are constructed in society (James and Prout 7; Stearns 9).

Further, this study shows that Indian literary traditions provide diverse and nuanced perspectives on childhood that transcend the conceptual bounds of Childhood Studies. The above-mentioned writings stress indigenous understandings of moral formation, devotion, social duty, and cultural continuity, offering essential alternatives to mainstream Eurocentric paradigms. Thus, the study emphasises the value of culturally grounded and historically sensitive approaches that recognise the diversity of childhood experiences across time and location. This method will not only broaden our understanding of Indian literary history but will also help to the construction of a more inclusive and globally aware framework for the study of children and childhood.

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